From the Sublime to the Numinous

A Study of Gothic Qualities in the Poetry and Drama of Shelley's Italian Period

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Abstract

In this thesis I consider six poems which Shelley wrote in Italy, between 1818 and his death in 1822: *Prometheus Unbound, The Cenci*, "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery", "Ode to the West Wind", *Adonais*, and *The Triumph of Life*. My chief aim is to examine Shelley's use of the Gothic in his endeavours to invoke the sublime and the numinous, my understanding of these terms being based, in general, on definitions given by Edmund Burke and Rudolph Otto respectively. I also study in detail the continuing presence of Gothic qualities in Shelley's work, from the time of his earliest poems and novels, and examine the origins of these Gothic elements not only as they appear in the works of Shelley's contemporaries such as Goethe, Matthew Lewis, William Beckford and Charles Brockden Brown, but also in the writings of earlier figures such as Spenser and Milton. In the poetry written during his time in Italy, it can be seen that Shelley also draws considerably on what can only be described as the Gothic elements in the works of Classical writers such as Aeschylus, Euripides, Ovid, Virgil and Lucan; and his works during this period show clearly that he is also strongly influenced by the irrational, otherworldly qualities present in the philosophies of Plotinus, Plato, and ultimately of Socrates.

It is Shelley's philosophical scepticism, with its inherently questioning views of both transcendentalism and rational materialism, which enables him to assume with credibility the role of one who desires to bring his readers into the proximity of the numinous; and as he has rejected all the traditional terminology, imagery and symbolism of Christianity, his use of the Gothic is an essential factor in the realising of

his intentions. Even so, it becomes evident that any success in the evocation of the numinous is no more dependent on the writer's openness to the possibility of a non-material future existence, than it is guaranteed by the presence of strongly Gothic qualities in the writing. For instance, any sense of the numinous is virtually absent from Shelley's supernatural last testament, *The Triumph of Life,* as it is also from *The Cenci,* which is the most consistently Gothic of all his later poetical works. Nevertheless, my thesis clearly demonstrates that in *Prometheus Unbound* and *Adonais* at least, Shelley is, through his use of the Gothic, entirely successful in bringing his readers into the presence of the numinous.

Introduction

Gothic themes and atmosphere dominate Shelley's early literary products. His Gothic novels *Zastrozzi* (1810) and *St Irvyne* (1810) contain plots, situations and characters typical of the genre — violent revenge, sexual jealousy, torture and confinement, robbers, nuns, the supernatural, the doomed Gothic villain — as well as the characteristically Gothic settings of subterranean dungeons, mountain caves, ruined abbeys, and the Mediterranean locations favoured by such varied authors as Lewis and Radcliffe. Much of Shelley's juvenile poetry is in a similar vein, for example "Zeinab and Kathema" (1810 or 1811) from *The Esdaile Notebook*, and *The Wandering Jew* of 1810. There is a considerable amount of Gothic imagery and effect in his *Queen Mab* of 1812-13, in which there are such characters as Ahasuerus and the "dark-robed priests" who burn the atheist. Yet it is the 1815 *Alastor* which is the most obviously Gothic of all Shelley's longer poems. As John V. Murphy says, it "serves as a prime example of serious and sophisticated application of character, situation, theme and mood that derive from the Gothic tradition" (Murphy 65). After *Alastor*, the Gothic in Shelley's poetry is less overt. It is integrated more comfortably into the overall structure of his work, and in some instances can be said to exist in a transfigured form, yet in a form which still remains essentially and identifiably Gothic. In this thesis, I intend to discuss Shelley's use of the Gothic in poetry which he wrote after his departure for Italy in March 1818. In so doing, I will also examine the origins of this Gothic quality in the writings of his favourite authors, looking at those works which had such a great and continuing influence on the direction of his poetry. The

poems on which I will concentrate are *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-19), *The Cenci* (1819), "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" (1819), "Ode to the West Wind" (1819), *Adonais* (1821), and *The Triumph of Life* (1822). Of Shelley's prose works, I will refer primarily to "On Life" (c.1815), "Essay on Christianity" (1815-1819), "Notes on Sculptures in Rome and Florence" (1819), "A Defence of Poetry" (1821), and letters written during his time in Italy.

In the work which Shelley produced during the last four years of his life, we see the Gothic characters, issues and situations from his early novels and poetry reappear in altered form, sometimes quite drastically so. The revenge, parricide and sexual corruption of *Zastrozzi* and *St Irvyne* are reworked in *The Cenci*, as is the ontological ambiguity present in *Alastor*; and in *Prometheus Unbound* it appears that the Gothic villain evolves into the Romantic hero. The Wandering Jew figure plays an essential, if concealed, role in *Adonais*; and the sinister allure of Leonardo's darkly Romantic Medusa can be seen as the obverse of the subject of "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816), as also can that of the "shape all light" in *The Triumph of Life*. Yet, as I will demonstrate, the chief importance of the continuing, if modified, Gothic quality of Shelley's verse can only be fully appreciated when that quality is seen as by far the most appropriate vehicle for that sense of the numinous — that is to say, of the spiritual or divine — which is present in so much of his later poetry; and is also seen as the most effective way in which he can convincingly communicate any of that sense of wonder and awe experienced in the presence of the unknowable. Also, any examples of this manifestation of the Gothic spirit — and the way in which it might draw us closer to the numinous — in Shelley's later work must be seen against the continuing change in his poetry throughout his Italian period, a change which in itself is expressive of typically Shelleyan paradox. For

example, after 1819 there is an obvious movement away from the sublime and numinous — yet still largely humanistic — optimism of *Prometheus Unbound,* to what can only be seen as, at the very least, the provisional acceptance of an objective spirituality in *The Triumph of Life,* yet a spirituality which is itself expressed in an almost overwhelmingly pessimistic work, from which both the sublime and the numinous are almost entirely absent.

In this thesis, I intend to show that any strong expression of the numinous or the spiritual in the later Shelley is largely dependent on a variety of the Burkean sublime, with the Gothic element as its central, continuing and developing component. Crucial categories of Edmund Burke's sublime are, after all, also predominant characteristics of the Gothic — terror, infinity, vastness, privation, tragedy, obscurity and above all, power — and Shelley uses all these qualities to increasingly good effect in the poetry he wrote between 1818 and 1822. Also, the continuing Gothic quality of his writing, with associated qualities of the numinous, enables him to avoid compromising himself with anything approaching a conventional Christian or transcendentalist expression of the Sublime. Right up to the time of his death, Shelley shows no hint of sympathy towards the ritual, creed or authority of any organised religion.

Given that Shelley's philosophical scepticism grants at least as much validity to a belief in a non-material, spiritual basis for existence as to its opposite, my thesis aims to demonstrate the means by which he attempts to offer the reader at least the possibility of experiencing the reality of the One or, in a context which is not specifically Christian, the objective presence of God (Pulos 103-104). Shelley's method of bringing about this process can be seen as being based upon an exploitation of the sublime aesthetic, which was itself largely antagonistic towards the empirical philosophy of his youth. This can be clearly seen

in the writings of earlier English theorists of the sublime aesthetic, such as Thomas Burnet who, in his *Sacred Theory of the Earth* of 1690, states that, when confronted by the seemingly endless panorama of nature,

> [w]e do naturally, upon such occasions, think of God and his greatness: and whatsoever hath but the shadow and appearance of INFINITE, as all things have that are too big for our comprehension, they fill and over-bear the mind with their Excess, and cast it into a pleasing kind of stupor and admiration. (109-110)

Burnet's work was much admired by the English Romantic poets generally, and by Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular, and although there is no evidence of Shelley having read Burnet's writings at first hand, he had certainly read Buffon's *La Théorie de la Terre*, which refers to Burnet (Leighton 11). However, it is the terror inherent in the Burkean sublime which forms the basis of the manifestations of the sublime and numinous in Shelley's later dramatic and poetical works. The central argument of Burke's well-known and highly influential *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* states that:

> [w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*. (36)

Although Burke was a Christian, his variety of the sublime would have been far more acceptable to Shelley than those of earlier, more

overtly religious aestheticians such as Burnet. As Angela Leighton points out in *Shelley and the Sublime*:

> He [Burke] presents the terrifying sublime object as an hypostatised abstraction, and specifically one which designates the absence of something. It is this aspect of Burke's *Enquiry* which sounds strangely modern. A source of the sublime is the mind's terror when confronted with emptiness and absence, and this emptiness and absence point to no mitigating divinity. If Burke's *Enquiry* stands behind the development of the Gothic in the second half of the century, it also begins to define that distinguishing feature of the Gothic: the uncanny. (22-23)

Yet Leighton is only partially correct in her analysis of the content of the Burkean sublime. In spite of Burke's apparent subjectification of the sublime experience — the emphasis shifting from the "object" of that experience (the "object" being the divine or numinous approached via the sublime) to the subject, that is, the writer — it is, in fact, the very Gothicity of Burke's variety of the sublime [1] which gives Shelley the opportunity to invest his own work with such power; and it is the

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[1] In writing this thesis, I have, as far as is appropriate or practicable, limited my use of texts available in Shelley's lifetime to those which had formed part of the poet's own reading, making good use of two invaluable sources of the titles of these texts — Mary Shelley's list of works read by her and her husband, and also the list of publications mentioned in Shelley's letters, which is to be found in P. B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols. ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964) 2: 467-88 Ironically, Burke's *Enquiry* is to be found in neither list (perhaps even more ironically, neither are works by any other of the major British theorists of the sublime), yet in Shelley's day the continuing influence of this work, recognised or not, was so universal as to more than justify my quite significant use of the text.

quality of the uncanny which is central to any experiencing of the numinous, or divine, as is explained by Rudolph Otto (1867-1937), the German Lutheran theologian, in the following statements from his *The Idea of the Holy*, a text which, together with Burke's *Enquiry*, has played an important part in the development of my argument. [2] According to Otto, the quality of the numinous can be defined as "an affective state in which the percipient — through feelings of awe, mystery, and fascination — becomes aware of an objective spiritual presence", and one can "argue that the feeling is universal, that it exists in both primitive and more highly developed religions" (Varnado 15). It was Otto who first described the numinous as such, and as a clear understanding of this term (if it possible to have any knowledge whatsoever regarding the "unknowable") is central to my thesis, I will quote further from S. L. Varnado's *Haunted Presence: The Numinous in Gothic Fiction*, where these definitions appear and are, to a degree, explicated:

> Edmund Burke, the most influential writer on the subject, had discussed sublimity as arising from astonishment, obscurity, power, privation, vastness, and infinity. His ideas parallel

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2 As the concept of the numinous is of such significance in my thesis, it has been given a relatively detailed exposition in this introduction. However, in order to present my argument as clearly and unequivocally as possible, I have, in the main body of my work, generally avoided the use not only of Otto's specialised terminology as it relates to his analysis of the workings of the numinous, but also of his classifications of its various aspects, with their associated theological implications. In writing this thesis, it has certainly not been my intention to consider Shelley from the viewpoint of Otto. Rather, my use of Otto's ideas has been heuristic, enabling me to more effectively investigate Shelley's use of the Gothic in his evocation of the otherworldly and the spiritual, and can be looked upon in the same light as Bloom's use of Buber in *Shelley's Mythmaking*.

those of Kant, Kames, Allison, and other writers on the subject. The concept of sublimity, in fact, closely resembles the numinous, as Otto pointed out. "The analogies between the consciousness of the sublime and the numinous may be easily grasped", he wrote. "To begin with, the *sublime*, like the *numinous*, is in Kantian language an idea or concept *that cannot be unfolded* or explicated (unauswickelbar) [. . .] A thing does not become sublime merely by being great. The concept itself remains unexplicated; it has in it something mysterious, and in this is like the numinous. A second point of resemblance is that the sublime exhibits the same peculiar dual character as the numinous; it is at once daunting, and yet singularly attracting in its impress on the mind [. . .] so the idea of the sublime is closely similar to that of the numinous, and is well adapted to excite it and to be excited by it, while each tends to pass over into the other".

The tendency for the sublime to "pass over" into the numinous is a favourite point with Otto:

"This mode of expression by way of grandeur or *sublimity* is found on higher levels, where it replaces mere *terror* or *dread* [. . .] While the element of *dread* is gradually overborne, the connection of *the sublime* and *the holy* becomes firmly established as a legitimate schematization and is carried on into the highest forms of religious consciousness". (29-30)

In describing something of the evolution of the awareness of the numinous in human cultures, Otto, in John W. Harvey's translation of

The Idea of the Holy, emphasises its universal quality, and the possibility of its being apprehended on various "levels" of spiritual experience and practice:

> Though the numinous emotion in its completest development shows a world of difference from the mere "daemonic dread", yet not even at the highest level does it belie its pedigree or kindred. Even when the worship of "daemons" has long since reached the higher level of worship of "gods", these gods still retain as "numina" something of the "ghost" in the impress they make on the feelings of the worshipper, viz. the peculiar quality of the "uncanny" and "awful", which survives with the quality of exaltedness and sublimity or is symbolized by means of it. And this element, softened though it is, does not disappear even on the highest level of all, where the worship of God is at its purest. Its disappearance would be indeed an essential loss. The "shudder" reappears in a form ennobled beyond measure where the soul, held speechless, trembles inwardly to the furthest fibre of its being. (17)

Thus it is that this essential presence of the uncanny in Shelley's evocations of the otherworldly, the transcendent, and the spiritual, lies at the centre of this thesis. This particularly Gothic quality undoubtedly has its place in the spectrum of the numinous, as C. S. Lewis states in *The Problem of Pain*: "With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous" (Varnado 11).

At this stage of the introduction, I feel I must attempt to draw some kind of distinction between terror and horror, those hallmarks of

the Gothic, in order to clarify subsequent uses of the terms. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto states:

> Not only is the saying of Luther, that the natural man cannot fear God perfectly, correct from the standpoint of psychology, but we ought to go further and add that the natural man is quite unable even to shudder (*grauen*) or feel horror in the real sense of the word. For "shuddering" is something more than "natural", ordinary fear. It implies that the mysterious is already beginning to loom before the mind, to touch the feelings. (15)

Also, Burke himself, in analysing the origins of the sublime in powerful feelings, writes in his *Enquiry* that

> [t]he ideas of *pain*, *sickness*, and *death*, fill the mind with strong emotions of horror; but *life* and *health*, though they put us in a capacity of being affected with pleasure, they make no such impression by the simple enjoyment. (36)

Even though Otto and Burke rarely use the word "horror", [3] when it

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3 "In 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', an essay published posthumously in the *New Monthly Magazine*, 7 (1826), [Radcliffe] observed that 'Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreader evil'.

does appear it is used in the sense of its being largely synonymous with "terror". On the other hand, Ann Radcliffe's strict differentiation between terror and horror draws a useful distinction between the uncanny, awe-inspiring mystery of terror, and that contrasting sense of stark, "positive" horror experienced in the presence of the uncompromising immediacy of physical violence, and the gruesome and gory carnage resulting from it. Yet as Castle clarifies in the note above, what is horror to the fictional heroine can be transmuted to terror in the reader; and although I generally observe Radcliffe's distinction between horror and terror, and particularly as it relates to realistic descriptions of mayhem, gore and carnage, I cannot wholly subscribe to her uncompromising separation of the two qualities when discussing such essentially Gothic matters as the horrific (and terrifying) Eumenides, the horrors and terrors of the Inquisition, or the "horribly beautiful" Medusa.

The Cenci is the most Gothic of Shelley's later works, and amongst his longer poetry is second only to *Alastor* in its concentrated Gothic qualities. The play has the suspenseful plot of the Gothic novel, yet the historical nature of the story, with its largely unchangeable characters and pre-ordained outcome, militates against any experiencing of the numinous; and it is this, and the absence of the supernatural, either real

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"That which terrifies, in other words, is necessarily mysterious; its very obscurity, which 'awakens' the imagination, is the source of its sublimity. That which horrifies, however, does so through its *lack* of mystery; it leaves nothing to the imagination of the viewer. Applying the distinction to the passage at hand [*The Mysteries of Udolpho*, pp.248-49], one might argue that Emily feels *horror* because she is in no doubt about the 'dreadful object' she has seen. Since we, as readers, cannot 'see' what she sees, however, our state of mind — theoretically at least — is closer to Radcliffean *terror*; we are free here to imagine the worst". Note by Terry Castle in Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobree (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 686-87.

or imagined, which finally rules out the possibility of any expression of the Ideal in this work. *Prometheus Unbound*, on the other hand, more obviously than in any other work, shows the course whereby Gothic elements disappear (Murphy 146). That is to say, the process of the spiritual and psychological re-integration of conflicting aspects of the hero's self results in a state which necessarily transcends the Gothic. Yet, initially, it is the very Gothicity of so much of the poem's atmosphere which enables the poet to depict so powerfully the plight of the Titan: his confinement and torture, his hideous and merciless tormentors, the terrible sublime of his physical surroundings; and the relentless tyranny and seeming omnipotence of Jupiter. And it is the dark and terrifying nature of these Gothic passages which adds so much potency to those contrasting sections which, in depicting transcendent light, love, beauty and freedom, progressively transform the whole atmosphere of the poem. Yet even in the midst of these elevated passages, there are still strong influences from what we can reasonably describe as the Gothic.

Before I discuss how the Gothic content of *Prometheus Unbound* enables Shelley to bring aspects of the numinous to his work, I will attempt to define the term "Gothic" as it applies to Shelley's poem. In so doing, I will restrict myself as much as possible to a discussion of the literary aspects of the subject. It is surely not wholly fortuitous that the countries most active in bringing about the Reformation — England and Germany — should have been the most vigorous exponents of Romantic and Gothic literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is the ruins of the abbeys, with their melancholy, cowled, spectral inhabitants, which form the subject matter of the earliest texts to show any sensibility regarding the Gothic past. John Webster's play of 1614, *The Duchess of Malfi*, is the earliest English work to include any substantial expression

of these sentiments (Quennell 9-10). In this extract, [4] Delio describes the view from the battlements:

DELIO. Yond's the Cardinal's window. This fortification
Grew from the ruins of an ancient abbey:
And to yond side o'th' river lies a wall,
Piece of a cloister, which in my opinion
Gives the best echo that you ever heard;
So hollow, and so dismal, and withal
So plain in the distinction of our words,
That many have suppos'd it is a spirit
That answers.

ANTONIO. I do love these ancient ruins:
We never tread upon them, but we set
Our foot upon some reverend history.
And, questionless, here in this open court,
Which now lies naked to the injuries
Of stormy weather, some men lie interr'd
Lov'd the church so well, and gave so largely to't,
They thought it should have canopi'd their bones
Till doomsday. But all things have their end:
Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men
Must have like death that we have. (V.iii.1-19)

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4 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from John Webster. *Three Plays: The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil's Law-Case*. Ed. D. C. Gunby. London: Penguin, 1972.

This short extract contains many of those features which would become staples of the Gothic novel — a sense of distancing from the present, the aesthetic of decay, eerie acoustics and the uncertain nature of supernatural occurrences, the confusing of appearances with reality, inclement weather, tombs and graveyards, the wronged dead, and the Gothic scene looked on as an embodiment of mutability, social sickness and decay.

The play from which this passage is taken is a revenge tragedy of the type which strongly influenced the style and structure of *The Cenci*, and from which were taken so many features of other Gothic works of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — the revenge theme itself, murder, rape, incest, confinement, torture; perverted, cruel and corrupt clergy, tyranny, darkness, mystery, suspense and the supernatural (Robinson 144-146). Although the horror plays of Webster, and the earlier revenge tragedies of such writers as Thomas Kyd, can be seen as the most obvious and sensational originators of the Gothic genre, it was no doubt the rapidly-increasing popularity of Shakespeare's drama throughout the eighteenth century which provided the greatest impetus to the emerging Gothic novel, particularly the popularity of such plays as *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Richard the Third* and *Measure for Measure*. Milton also regained his status and popularity at this time, and can be considered as an important originator of Gothic themes and images. As Maggie Kilgour says in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*:

> One of the most omnipresent spectres called back in the Gothic is that of Milton, whose version of the myth of the fall and redemption, creation and decreation, is, as Frankenstein again reveals, an important model for Gothic plots. For Burke, Milton is the great artist of the sublime, who exploits

> ambiguity and uncertainty to its highest effect [. . .] his Satan provided an important model for (among other things) the Gothic villain [. . .] . (40)

Spenser can also be seen as one of the most important precursors of Gothic style and atmosphere. As the eighteenth century progressed, he came to be increasingly admired as an exponent of an early form of romance, whose *Faerie Queene* contained political and religious themes woven into an artificially archaic, pseudo-medieval tapestry of magic, love, sex, violence, the grotesque and the supernatural, all of which qualities were to feature prominently in the Gothic novel. Later in this thesis I will demonstrate that both Spenser and Milton are particularly significant influences in that most sublime and numinous, and highly Gothic, section of *Prometheus Unbound,* which describes Asia's encounter with Demogorgon.

I. *Prometheus Unbound* and the Gothic Novel

The Gothic influences in *Prometheus Unbound* [1] are certainly not confined to those gained directly from the traditions of the English high culture of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. In any related discussion of Shelley's greatest poem, we have to take into account British and American Gothic novels written after 1760, works in which genre Shelley was an author, as well as an avid reader. The physical, mental and emotional agonies of Prometheus, in his isolated, comfortless ravine are, in spite of the contrasting locations of the settings, strongly reminiscent of those of the imprisoned Agnes in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, [2] which Shelley read in 1814: [3]

> "Chained down in one of these secret dungeons, shut out from the world and light for ever [. . .] thus must you groan away the remainder of your days" [. . .] An abyss presented itself to my affrighted eyes [. . .] I implored compassion, rent the air with my cries, and summoned both heaven and earth to my assistance [. . .] My blood ran cold, as I gazed on this

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1 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*. Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers. New York: W. W. Norton, 1977.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from *Four Gothic Novels*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

3 See Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844: Volume II, 1822-1844*, eds. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 659. Hereafter cited as *Journals*.

> melancholy abode. The cold vapours hovering in the air, the walls green with damp [. . .] the Chain destined to bind me for ever to my prison, and the Reptiles of every description [. . .] struck my heart with terrors almost too exquisite for nature to bear. (422-23)

In this passage we can see descriptions of events and feelings very similar to those experienced by the Titan at the beginning of Shelley's poem — the terrible sense of isolation and exile from the rest of humanity, the terrifying sublime of the ravine's abyss, the absence of any hope of respite or compassion, the physical harshness of the place of imprisonment, the reality of the confining chain, and the presence of terrifying creatures — in Agnes' case, reptiles. After Lewis's eponymous monk summons the Daemon, he is taken to a place which bears a strong physical resemblance to the Ravine described at the opening of *Prometheus Unbound:*

> [T]he Monk supported by his infernal guide, traversed the air with the rapidity of an arrow, and a few moments placed him upon a Precipice's brink [. . .] The Objects now before his eyes, and which the full Moon sailing through clouds permitted him to examine, were ill-calculated to inspire that calm, of which He stood so much in need [. . .] the gloomy Caverns and steep rocks, rising above each other [. . .] solitary clusters of Trees scattered here and there, among whose thick-twined branches the wind of night sighed hoarsely and mournfully; the shrill cry of mountain Eagles, who had built their nests among these lonely Desarts; the stunning roar of torrents, as swelled by late rains they rushed violently down tremendous

> precipices; and the dark waters of a silent sluggish stream which faintly reflected the moon-beams [. . .].
>
> (441-42)

In spite of the lack of any landscape description, the fate of Jupiter, as he is plunged into the abyss, can also be seen to parallel closely that of Ambrose in *The Monk*:

> DEMOGORGON. Descend, and follow me down the abyss [. . .]
>
> JUPITER. [. . .] Mercy! mercy!
> No pity — no release, no respite! . . .Oh [. . .]
> The elements obey me not . . I sink . . .
> Dizzily down — ever, forever, down —
> And, like a cloud, mine enemy above
> Darkens my fall with victory! — Ai! Ai!
>
> (*PU* III.i.53, 63-64, 80-83)

Although Ambrose and the Daemon are not, like Jupiter and Demogorgon, "[e]ven as a vulture and a snake [. . .] twisted in inextricable fight" (III.i.72-73), the Monk is nevertheless, like Jupiter, precipitated into space; in Ambrose's case, by the vulture-like Daemon who,

> darting his talons into the Monk's shaven crown [. . .] sprang with him from the rock. The Caves and mountains rang with Ambrosio's shrieks. The Daemon [4] continued to soar aloft,

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4 Demogorgon has also been described as a "demon of magic". See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Prometheus Unbound: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Lawrence John Zillman, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959) 458.

> till reaching a dreadful height, He released the sufferer. Headlong fell the Monk through the airy waste [. . .]. (443-44)

And, again, reminiscent of the sufferings of Jupiter's alter-ego, Prometheus, Ambrosio is tormented by multitudes of Fury-like insects,

> called forth by the warmth; They drank the blood which trickled from Ambrosio's wounds; He had no power to drive them from him, and they fastened upon his sores, darted their stings into his body, covered him with their multitudes, and inflicted on him tortures the most exquisite and insupportable. The Eagles of the rock tore his flesh piecemeal [. . .] .
>
> (444)

The last sentence is particularly apt in any discussion of *Prometheus Unbound*, as Jupiter had decreed that every day the Titan's liver would be torn by an eagle, to be miraculously healed subsequently, in preparation for the next day's torment.

I will postpone, for the time being, any discussion of the strikingly obvious presence of the sublime and the numinous in *The Monk*, in order to emphasise the fact that Shelley has, without doubt, drawn so much Gothic imagery, and so many plot ingredients, from a novel with which he was very familiar, a novel which manifested so many typical, if in this case extreme, features and qualities of the Gothic; and most strikingly, the dark, sinister atmosphere of crypt and dungeons, and the description of confinement and tortures perpetrated by the twisted representatives of a powerful tyrant — that is to say, surroundings, events and characters that can be compared very closely with those present in *Prometheus Unbound*.

Yet in Shelley's poem we can see obvious influences from contemporary fictional material which conforms hardly at all to definitions of the Gothic given so far. From this category I will discuss two more novels which were amongst Shelley's favourite books. The first of these is *Vathek*, [5] by William Beckford, which Shelley read in 1815. Although Beckford's novel is usually described as Gothic, it has no apparent connection with revenge tragedy, early romance, or Milton; and contains none of that imagery or atmosphere, generally considered to be Gothic, which is based on ruined abbeys, haunted graveyards, or the sinister aspects of Roman Catholicism. However, the novel has its eponymous tyrant, a vast quantity of sex and violence, and is pervaded with the supernatural. Added to this are many passages which evoke a strong sense of the sublime and the numinous, particularly those sections of the novel which feature the awe-inspiring and sublimely tyrannical Vathek; or those which describe breath-taking, panoramic vistas, and visions of soaring heights and plunging depths. In this final category is Beckford's description of the magical chasm:

> The sky immediately brightened; and, by the light of the planets, which seemed almost to blaze, Vathek beheld the earth open; and, at the extremity of a vast black chasm, a portal of ebony [. . .]. (97)

This calls to mind the beginning of *Prometheus Unbound* II.iii, where Asia and Panthea, like the degenerate Caliph, are found at the edge of a chasm, awaiting the manifestation of a great supernatural presence:

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5 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from *Four Gothic Novels*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

PANTHEA. Hither the sound has borne us — to the realm
Of Demogorgon, and the mighty portal,
Like a volcano's meteor-breathing chasm,
Whence the oracular vapour is hurled up [. . .] . (II.iii.1-4)

If we consider the last quotation from *Vathek*, [6] the occurrence of "chasm" and "portal" in the above, and the close proximity of these occurrences, are striking; as is Shelley's further use of "portal" at the end of II.iii, and "ebon" at the beginning of the following scene:

SONG OF SPIRITS. [. . .] That the Eternal, the Immortal,
Must unloose through life's portal
The snake-like Doom coiled underneath his throne
By that alone!

SCENE IV

The Cave of Demogorgon. Asia *and* Panthea.

PANTHEA. What veiled form sits on that ebon throne?
(II.iii.95-98, II.iv.1)

Parallelling the descent of Asia and Panthea into the realm of Demogorgon, Vathek and Nouronihar descend to Hell, the domain of Eblis:

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6 *Vathek* exerted a powerful influence on Shelley, directly, and by way of the works of other writers who fell under the spell of Beckford's bizarre novel. Such a text was *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), Southey's long poem, which Shelley read in 1814 (*Journals* 677).

> On hastening their descent, with an ardent impetuosity, they felt their steps accelerated to such a degree, that they seemed not walking but falling from a precipice. Their progress, however, was at length impeded, by a vast portal of ebony [. . .]. (147)

The couple had begun their descent into the abyss from a huge platform of black marble at the head of a great valley:

> The moon dilated on a vast platform, the shades of the lofty columns which reached from the terrace almost to the clouds. (146)

These terraces, with their colossal pillars, are derived from the description of the ruins of Xerxes's temple at Persepolis, or Istakar, in Chardin's *Voyage en Perse et autres lieux de l'Orient* of 1711. This work, together with d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, was a chief source of material for *Vathek*, as can be seen in the above and following extracts from Beckford's novel (Gemmett 99-101):

> In this manner they advanced by moon-light, till they came within view of the two towering rocks that form a kind of portal to the valley, at the extremity of which, rose the vast ruins of Istakar. (145-46)

In his book, Chardin gives a description of these same two rocks which form the gateway to the valley of Istakar. In addition to this, he describes the black marble terrace and the mountainside mausoleums

which are also features of eerie and sublime landscape in Beckford's novel (Gemmett 101).

With the location of *Prometheus Unbound* being set in the Indian Caucasus, it is understandable that many aspects of atmosphere, plot and description should be considered by both writer and reader to be Indian, or even Persian, rather than those more usually associated with the drama of the ancient Greeks. Shelley found Zoroastrianism a great source of literary and philosophical inspiration in the years up to, and including, the writing of his greatest work (Welburn 104-10). The ancient cave temples of the early Zoroastrians can be seen as the originals of the spiritually significant caverns featured so prominently in *Prometheus Unbound*, and we can see reflected in the mysterious transformation which takes place in III.iv.98-118, the development of the temple caves of ancient Persia into pillared platforms located in open spaces, such as the one identified in the ruins of Xerxes's temple in Persepolis. As Curran says, in his *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis*:

> Shelley's derivation of his Promethean cave from a Zoroastrian model is supported by the symbolic revision of the cave that the Spirit of the Hour intends to create in the sun. There the entire assemblage will be sculpted in "Phidian forms" (III.iv.112) in the centre of a temple:
>
> *Beneath a dome fretted with graven flowers,*
> *Poised on twelve columns of resplendent stone,*
> *And open to the bright and liquid sky.*
>
> (III.iv.116-18)
>
> Not only was the eastern fondness for domes said to derive from the Mithraic cavern, whose dome symbolically

represented the heavens, but the particular domed temple Shelley here delineates has a precise architectural history [as Curran points out in this extract from Maurice's *Indian Antiquities*] :

> *The Monoptere was a circular edifice without walls, having a dome supported by columns, and was, doubtless, the invention of Zoroaster, or some ancient zealous fire-worshipper of Persia, to preserve the consecrated flames that glowed on their altars from being extinguished by the violence of rain and tempests.*

Thus, the Spirit of the Hour's fire temple is the symbolic equivalent of the Promethean cave. Each is appropriate to its own element, the fire temple being organic to the sun as the Zoroastrian cave is to the earth. (78-79)

Curran assumes that Shelley derived this model of a temple from his studies of Zoroastrianism, or from those of his friend John Newton, an authority on ancient religions and the occult. Yet in the above lines from *Prometheus Unbound*, it is also possible to see an alternative source of this imagery — the American Gothic novel *Wieland*, [7] by Charles Brockden Brown, a work which Shelley read in 1815, the same year as he read *Vathek* (Holmes 221). In Brown's novel, the hero's father evolves his own fanatical religion, which he privately practises

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7 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Charles Brockden Brown. *Wieland or the Transformation.* Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1963.

in a temple he has built for himself:

> The edifice was slight and airy. It was no more than a circular area, twelve feet in diameter, whose flooring was the rock, cleared of moss and shrubs, and exactly levelled, edged by twelve Tuscan columns, and covered by an undulating dome.
>
> (31)

The resemblance of this structure to the temple of the Spirit of the Hour is striking. Apart from the presence of "graven flowers", Shelley's edifice is virtually identical to that described in *Wieland.* As far as the significance of Zoroastrian fire ritual is concerned in relation to the function of the sun (and fire) in *Prometheus Unbound,* Wieland's father suffers a sudden and unexplained death by spontaneous combustion, whilst worshipping in his temple. The significance of the above cannot be underestimated, as is made clear in David Punter's *The Literature of Terror:*

> Peacock claimed that Brown was one of the deepest influences on Shelley, that "nothing so blended itself with the structure of his interior mind as the creations of Brown", and his list of Shelley's six favourite books includes, alongside *Faust* and *Die Räuber*, four of Brown's novels: *Wieland* (1798), *Ormond* (1799), *Edgar Huntly* (1799), and *Arthur Mervyn* (1800).
>
> The book that Peacock singles out in *Gryll Grange* for particular mention is *Wieland.* (191)

Charles Brockden Brown is America's first novelist, and is generally considered to be a writer in the Gothic genre. However,

regarding any discussion of the supernatural or the numinous, the spirit of his version of the Gothic closely resembled that of Godwin, who was his model and inspiration. Brown himself quite clearly expresses his disdain for the genre in the preface to *Edgar Huntly*, his opinions being quoted by Jack G. Voller in *The Supernatural Sublime*:

> One merit the [present] writer may at least claim: — that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstitions and exploded manners, Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the Western wilderness, are far more suitable; and for a native of America to overlook these would admit of no apology. (75)

Although a Quaker, Brown was essentially an eighteenth-century Enlightenment empiricist. His novels are based on social and psychological themes, featuring only apparently miraculous or supernatural matters, such as ventriloquism or spontaneous combustion. And even though such novels as *Wieland* can conjure up strong apprehensions of the numinous, any lasting sense of wonder, let alone of an objective spirituality, quickly evaporates when the reader becomes aware of the spurious nature of any supernatural occurrence. Voller here throws light on Brown's intentions:

> The uncertainties in Wieland, intensified as they are by an atmosphere of murder and madness, constitute not only the most Gothic elements of the work but its supernatural sublime as well. There are times in the novel when a character believes

> for a moment that she has experienced a supernatural phenomenon, but this sort of Gothic posturing, employed so assiduously by Radcliffe and others, meant little to Brown. He wanted not to titillate or generate casual thrills that would soon be dispersed but to engage genuine epistemological doubts.
>
> (77)

So in the writing of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley has gleaned extremely significant material from the works of at least three of the best known contemporary Gothic novelists — Lewis, Beckford and Brown. Yet two of these works — Beckford's *Vathek* and Brown's *Wieland* — contain little that can be considered as Gothic, in terms of the medieval, the species of supernatural involved, the funereal, the ecclesiastical (or Catholic), or the essentially European.

All of the above has done much to illustrate the highly elusive nature of any definition of the term Gothic, when used in its literary sense. A large proportion of many of the pivotal works of the Canon, by Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, can be considered to be far more Gothic — by most definitions of the term — than two of the so-called Gothic novels which most influenced Shelley in his writing of *Prometheus Unbound.* Yet it was only through the reworking of the Gothic motifs of the earlier works into the complex plot structures of the sensational Gothic novel — a medium in which suspense, and fear of the unknown, are able to exert such a direct and sustained effect upon the reader — that the Gothic spirit was able to have such a powerful impact at such a crucial period in the development of literature. However, without discounting the crucial importance of any of the above, Robert D. Hume quite correctly identifies that quality which unifies not only the different varieties of Gothic novel, but all Gothic works. In his article,

"Gothic versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel", in the first volume of *The English Gothic Novel: A Miscellany in Four Volumes* (in the Salzburg University *Romantic Reassessment* series), Hume states that it must still be acknowledged that the chief characteristic of the Gothic novel is its atmosphere, not the specific types of trappings or settings it exploits:

> The atmosphere is one of evil and brooding terror; the imaginary world in which the action takes place is the author's objectification of his imaginative sense of the atmosphere. In other words, the setting exists to convey the atmosphere. Neither suspense nor horror is dependent upon a particular setting or atmosphere. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are not Gothic novels. The Gothic novel uses its atmosphere for ends which are fundamentally psychological [. . .].
>
> Wild landscapes, ruined abbeys, and the like, were merely a convenient convention, a standardised method of achieving the desired atmosphere [. . .] time and place are irrelevant [. . .] as long as they are vague or remote. Beckford's *Vathek* is sometimes discussed as an "oriental tale" in the tradition of *Rasselas*, but it is basically a Gothic novel whose oriental setting provides the necessary "distance".
>
> (44)

These criteria and definitions can be applied just as closely to Shelley's use of the Gothic in *Prometheus Unbound*, whether or not the "Gothic" influence and atmosphere derive from Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, Spenser, Milton, or the novels of such writer as Lewis, Beckford

and Brown. And in the following section, I will demonstrate that these same definitions can be used with just as much validity in any discussion of what may be considered as "Gothic" atmosphere in the so-called Classical world.

II. *Prometheus Unbound* and the Classical Gothic

In spite of the foregoing broad definition of the term "Gothic", and the fact that an appropriately atmospheric oriental setting has been shown to be as essentially "Gothic" as that of any ruined medieval abbey, it is still understandable that the world of Aeschylus should be seen as being diametrically opposed to that of Lewis, Beckford and Brown. Our view of the Classical has been focussed so persistently, and for so long, through the lenses of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's aesthetic and moral ideals — as far as he was concerned, "the highest beauty is in God" — that it can be easily overlooked that, although the balanced symmetry and calm tranquillity of the ideal Classical body can indeed reveal to us those Apollonian qualities of light, harmony and reason, it will be rather the sublimely Gothic agonies of Prometheus, and the unrelenting terror of the hideous Eumenides, which will bring us to the boundaries of that state of the numinous, which is, after all, only yet another expression of Winckelmann's God (Winckelmann 118).

Like Gothicism itself, the Classical style was, at different times, all things to all people — a means by which imperial powers could exert their control over the suggestible populace; or an expression of liberty, democracy and revolution — a way of experiencing the illuminating harmony of the cosmos; or the ultimate celebration of the tyranny of cold reason. Winckelmann's writing had inspired the Neo-classicism of the French revolutionaries, but even by that period his theories were seen in some areas as expressive of a static, compliant, unadventurous, Establishment idealisation of ancient Greece. The Swiss Henry Fuseli had been a devotee of Winckelmann, and had translated his *Reflections*

on the Paintings and Sculptures of the Greeks into English in 1765. Yet later in life, in the *Introduction* to his Academy lectures, he writes of Winckelmann's "frigid reveries", of his sacrificing passion to a stultifying order. In an 1809 diary entry, Fuseli refers to him as a "useless rhapsodist" (Winckelmann 10). And Fuseli was not the only British-based artist to react eventually against Winckelmann's uncompromising vision of Classicism:

> So influential had Winckelmann's interpretation of classical art become, particularly his great stress on simplicity and calmness, that Reynolds found it necessary in his eighth and tenth Academy discourses to warn his audience that the art of the ancients had "something beside mere simplicity" to recommend it. (Winckelmann 10)

A. W. Schlegel, [1] although still heavily influenced by Winckelmann's theories, came to realise that a new dynamic was required to re-animate and transform the supposedly ideal forms and qualities of the Classical world:

> The Grecian ideal of human nature was perfect unison and proportion between all the powers, — a natural harmony. The moderns, on the contrary, have arrived at the consciousness of an internal discord which renders such an ideal impossible; and hence the endeavour of their poetry is

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1 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from A. W. Schlegel's *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* are taken from R. A. Foakes, ed. *Romantic Criticism 1800-1850*. London: Edward Arnold, 1968.

> to reconcile these two worlds between which we find ourselves divided, and to blend them indissolubly together. The impressions of the senses are to be hallowed, as it were, by a mysterious connexion with higher feelings; and the soul, on the other hand, embodies its forebodings, or indescribable intuitions of infinity, in types and symbols borrowed from the visible world. (57-58)

Here, in "Lecture 1", Schlegel gives a clear description of the process by which the fragmented, disturbed consciousness and alienated soul of the modern — that is, Romantic — artist can regain their links with the infinite by the "impressions of the senses" from the outside world being connected "with higher feelings" through a process involving the sublime, as Wordsworth demonstrates; and by the soul expressing itself, also by means of the sublime, "in types and symbols borrowed from the visible world", which leads, in turn, to an experiencing of the numinous.

Shelley, who was reading the above about six months prior to beginning *Prometheus Unbound,* attains these goals in that poem. But surely this is also what Aeschylus himself has expressed to such a considerable degree in *Prometheus Bound* and *The Eumenides* [2] (Leighton 76). In the latter play, on which Shelley based his own version of the Furies, we can see that Aeschylus is as much of a Romantic or "modern" as those writers alluded to by A. W. Schlegel in the above extract, and we become acutely aware of the unbalanced nature of Winckelmann's view of the Classical. In the words of Schlegel,

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2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Aeschylus. *The Eumenides.* Trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

Aeschylus is entirely successful in his ability to "reconcile" Winckelmann's "Grecian ideal of human nature" with "the consciousness of an internal discord which renders such an ideal impossible". This discord is embodied in the Eumenides, as they are described by Pythia, priestess of Apollo at the god's shrine at Delphi:

> Not women, but Gorgons I call them;
> no, not even to the shape of Gorgons can I compare them.
> I have seen before now paintings of those that carried off
> the feast of Phineus; but these appear wingless,
> black, altogether hateful in their ways;
> and they snore with a blast unapproachable,
> and from their eyes they drip a loathsome liquid.
> And their attire is such as one should not bring
> near to the statues of the gods nor into the houses of men [. . .]
> For the sake of evil they came into being, since evil
> darkness and Tartarus below the earth is their portion [. . .] .
>
> (48-56, 71-72)

These Furies, or Erinyes, pursue the guilty one as ravening, relentless hounds would chase their quarry: "Yes, like a hound after a wounded fawn / by the drops of blood do we track him down" (lines 246-47). When they catch sight of the fleeing Orestes, they tell him:

> [I]n atonement while you still live you must let us swill
> the rich, red offering from your limbs; from you
> may I win myself a meal — a cruel drink!
> Still living I shall dry you up and hale you down below [. . .] .
>
> (264-67)

In Classical mythology, the role of the Furies is that of terrifying agents of revenge, who have a particular interest in pursuing and tormenting those who have committed crimes against the family; and the fiendish, sadistic glee with which they carry out their duties is in sharp contrast to any concept of the delicately balanced scales of a disinterested Justice, operating solely within the limits of reason (Hesiod 168). The Furies embody the horrifying, awe-inspiring, uncontrollable, elemental forces of the primal world which arose out of Chaos long before the Olympians gained ascendancy; and as such, can be seen as survivors of an early Greek society existing long before the Classical period. Such irrational concepts as fate, revenge, and divine temptation underlie the mythology and society of the Archaic period, and continue into the Classical world of Aeschylus (Dodds 5-10). Even at the height of rational, Classical society, Socrates states that "our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness . . . provided the madness is given us by divine gift"; and in the *Phaedrus*, Plato shows him as dividing divine madness into four categories, with their respective tutelary figures — prophetic madness under Apollo, ritual madness under Dionysus, poetic madness inspired by the Muses, and finally the erotic madness of Aphrodite and Eros (Dodds 64-68). In the Archaic age, the orgiastic Dionysus was as significant as Apollo, whose own prophetic "madness" was contained subsequently within "Classically" acceptable parameters. [3] Indeed, on the negative side of the cult of Dionysus, the

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[3] Yet even in the so-called Classical period, Apollo's nature can reveal a callous, savage and villainous aspect, as is seen in *The Libation Bearers* of Aeschylus. Also, in this play, the very name by which Orestes refers to him in his prophetic capacity — Loxias — is generally considered to be connected with a word meaning "crooked", in reference to the devious nature of his oracular pronouncements. See Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970) 23-24.

Maenads continued the Eumenides' practice of hunting down animals and men, to catch and kill them in a gleeful orgy of bloodletting and dismemberment, a celebration, in other words, of what can only be reasonably seen as the dark, subterranean aspects of the irrational Gothic world — sadistic cruelty, horror, destruction, and the distorted channelling of frustrated creative impulses (Guthrie 32-33). So with regard to the last-mentioned aspect, it would seem quite understandable for Aeschylus, in *The Eumenides*, to describes the Furies as "despicable creatures [. . .] grey virgins, ancient maidens, with whom no god / nor any among men nor any beast has intercourse" (lines 68-70).

In *Prometheus Unbound*, the Furies display their predatory, Gothic qualities as soon as the audience encounters them, as they gloatingly contemplate the torture of Prometheus:

> FIRST FURY. Ha! I scent life!
>
> SECOND FURY. Let me but look into his eyes!
>
> THIRD FURY. The hope of torturing him smells like a heap
> Of corpses, to a death-bird after battle. (I.338-40)

The Furies echo the imagery of the hunted fawn from *The Eumenides*:

> FIRST FURY. We are the ministers of pain and fear
> And disappointment and mistrust and hate
> And clinging crime; and as lean dogs pursue
> Through wood and lake some struck and sobbing fawn,
> We track all things that weep and bleed and live

When the great King betrays them to our will. (I.452-57)

Yet in spite of the terrifyingly inhuman cruelty and blood-lust of the Furies, there is still a terrible justification in their actions; and although in *The Eumenides*, Apollo condemns the Furies as horrific symbols of an outmoded system of vendetta, his own behaviour in *The Libation Bearers* can be seen as being equally retributive, as he orders Orestes to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Also, it can be said with a large degree of justification that the actions of the Eumenides in the works of Aeschylus as a whole appear quite civilized compared to those of the Furies in Book 4 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, [4] whose victims have neither committed murder nor are involved in inherited guilt. Athamas and Ino, and their two little children, are guilty only by association with Dionysus, and it is for this alone that they are driven insane and destroyed by the Furies, at the command of Juno:

> Can Juno then do nothing but lament
> Wrongs unavenged? Is that enough for me?
> Is that my only power? But he himself [Dionysus]
> Teaches me what to do (one may be taught
> Even by one's enemy). The power of madness
> Is demonstrated more than well enough
> By Pentheus' murder. Why should Ino not
> Be stung to madness too, and take the road

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4 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. A. D. Melville. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. For dates of Shelley's reading of *Metamorphoses*, see *Journal* 665.

Of frenzy where her kin have shown the way?

(Bk.IV. 428-36)

Maddened by the magical venom of the Furies' snakes, Athamas kills his son, and Ino leaps off a cliff with her daughter in her arms:

And, in his madness hunting her, tracked down
His wife and snatched Learchus from her arms,
His little laughing son with hands outstretched,
And like a slinger whirled him round and round
And wildly smashed the baby's head against
A granite block. (Bk IV. 515-20)

Juno's relentless, yet entirely unjustified — and essentially Gothic — revenge foreshadows the career of Zastrozzi, [5] the eponymous protagonist of Shelley's first novel, a Gothic villain who carries out his mother's last wishes in destroying his innocent half-brother Verezzi, the son of the man who had deserted Zastrozzi's mother and had driven her to an early grave. Just as the Furies' venom induces insanity in Athamas before he kills his son, so Zastrozzi drives Verezzi to temporary madness and suicide. He had previously murdered the father of Verezzi, and in doing this, had killed his own father:

"But I destroyed his *body* alone", added Zastrozzi, with a

5 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Shelley's novels are taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Zastrozzi and St Irvyne*. Ed. Stephen C. Behrendt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

> terrible look of insatiated vengeance: "time has taught me better: his son's *soul* is hell-doomed to all eternity: he destroyed himself; but my machinations, though unseen, effected his destruction". (102)

In *The Eumenides*, we see how the savage, primitive justice of the Furies is at least tempered by the oracular mediation of Apollo. Yet the oracles cannot be considered to be sources of calm reason. With the most prominent being those dedicated to Apollo at Delos and Delphi, they can be seen as constituting the irrational centre of the Classical world. At its heart, the culture of ancient Greece, which such commentators as Winckelmann saw as the enduring model of symmetry, poised harmony and calm rationality, was inspired and guided by such figures as the prophetess of Apollo at Delphi, who delivered her messages whilst in the grip of the prophetic madness inspired by her patron god, in the sublimely obscure depths of her sacred, Gothic cavern (Dodds 70-73). It is clear that the descent of Asia and Panthea from their high, volcanic peak into the vaporous depths of Demogorgon's cave (II.iii and iv) originates in part from Book Six of Virgil's *Aeneid,* [6] a section of the work long since considered to contain the only surviving accurate account of what was undertaken and experienced in the performance of the ancient mysteries (Curran 1975, 53). Shelley was reading *The Aeneid* in 1818, the year in which he wrote Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*, and Virgil's work would still have been fresh in his mind the following year, when he wrote Act II (*Journal* 681). In Book Six, Aeneas approaches the obscure and smoky realms of the Sibyl of Cumae, who is the

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6 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Virgil. *The Aeneid.* Trans. John Jackson. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1995.

custodian of the portal of the underworld, situated close to the desolate, lifeless volcanic crater lake of Avernus:

> But good Aeneas repaired to the heights, whereover Apollo holds ward aloft, and to the cavern, vast and remote, that guards the secrecy of the dread Sibyl, on whom the seer of Delos breathes his great mind and soul, and unfolds the days to be. (89)

Later on, Virgil describes the Sybil, inspired by the prophetic madness of Apollo:

> But in her cavern the prophetess, intolerant yet of Phoebus' will, raved in limitless frenzy, straining to exorcise the mighty god from her soul: but all the more he curbed her foaming lips to weariness, subdued her fierce heart, and moulded her to his constraint. (91)

Although Wasserman describes Act II of *Prometheus Unbound* as being Virgilian, and although so much of this Act is quite obviously inspired by Book 6 of *The Aeneid,* Book 5 of Lucan's *Pharsalia* [7] must also be seen as giving rise to this same section of Shelley's poem (Wasserman 344n). In fact Shelley preferred Lucan to Virgil, seeing him as a fellow-fighter against evil and injustice, and as a writer who, unlike Virgil, was not under suspicion of being an apologist for an inhuman imperialism (Lucan, trans. Graves 23-24). The relevant

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7 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Lucan. *Pharsalia: The Civil War*. Trans. Douglas Little. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1989.

passages of *Pharsalia* demonstrate a much greater similarity to Shelley's account of Demogorgon and his mysterious realm than anything to be found in *The Aeneid,* and they also quite clearly parody Virgil's work:

> Who is the god concealed here?
> what being banished from aether stoops to the narrow cell
> of lightless cave? what spirit of sky, enduring earth,
> possesses every secret of the course of time,
> shares with the firmament the knowledge of what will be
> and yet reveals himself to mortals and suffers the touch
> of men? a god so great, so potent whether he
> but sings determined fate or fate is what his song
> determines. No small part perhaps of Jupiter
> the Whole, secreted in our sphere to guide it — earth
> it holds suspended in vacant air — in Delphic cave
> comes forth and, essence of the Thunderer Divine,
> is there inhaled; and when the virgin gets it in
> her breast, belabouring the human mind it roars
> through mantic mouth as Etna fired to boiling bursts
> on Sicily, or bellowing Typhoeus, buried
> for ever in the stone of Ischia, sets the rocks
> of Naples smoking. (Bk V. 85-102)

Like Virgil's Cumae, and Shelley's abode of Demogorgon, Lucan's Delphi is a place of volcanic activity, and the divine essence associated with volcanic vapours seeps from the chasm up into the priestess's cavern, where the seeress inhales it before uttering her prophecies. The divine, prophetic madness of Delphi's Pythoness resembles that of the Cumaean Sibyl, yet the priestess of *Pharsalia* is a long-inactive, reluctant

prophetess, and the action upon her of Apollo's seemingly-punitive inspiration shows the strongly bizarre and grotesque aspect of Lucan's essentially Gothic account. There is also more than a hint here of a sadistic variety of sexuality more usually associated with the Gothic world of "Monk" Lewis and his tormented nuns, than with the greatest poets of the Classical world:

> In terror then the virgin, rushing to
> the tripod and drawing near the unplumbed chasm, drank
> and filled her unaccustomed breast with afflatus of gods
> which the cavern's breath, through ages unexhausted, poured
> into the seeress; and at last the Healer had
> her Delphic heart, in fullness never known before
> invades his handmaid's body, driving out the mind
> that was and forcing mortal soul and flesh to yield
> to a god. Beside herself, with jerky puppet neck,
> she runs the cave [. . .].
>
> O you lash and goad
> her, pour fire through her veins, — yet curb her too,
> and what you let your priestess know forbid her to
> reveal [. . .]
>
> But then
> from frenzied lips distraction poured in foam with gasps
> and groans and shreds of words, despairing howls that echoed
> through the cavern's vastness, till at last the virgin was tamed
> to utterance coherent. (Bk V. 161-70, 174-77, 189-93)

The above extracts from Lucan clearly demonstrate that although Shelley's description of the descent of Asia and Panthea to the realm of

Demogorgon owes so much to Book 6 of *The Aeneid,* the general atmosphere, as well as the particular details of the scene described in II.iii.1-10, are derived far more from Book 5 of *Pharsalia.* It cannot be lost sight of that it is Apollo, generally considered to be the calm and rational embodiment of Classical balance and harmony, who inspires the writhing, foaming Sibyl, and not the wild, frenzied Dionysus, who is the god invariably associated with the Romantic and the Gothic. The above passages from *The Aeneid* and *Pharsalia* are a long way from the noble simplicity and calm grandeur of Winckelmann's Classical ideals.

Just as Apollo has been shown as engendering and exploiting so mercilessly the prophetic madness of the Sybil of Cumae and the Delphic Pythoness, so his guidance and protection of Orestes in Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers* [8] can also be seen as having horrifyingly cruel and barbaric aspects. The threats recounted by Orestes are of the type more generally expected to issue from the mouth of the most devilish of Gothic villains than from that of the shining Olympian. For some reason, it seems easy enough to forget Apollo's flaying of Marsyas, or his spreading of pestilence among the Greeks at Troy:

> Never shall I be betrayed by Loxias' mighty
> oracle, which commands me to pass through this danger,
> raising many a loud cry and naming
> chilly plagues to freeze my warm heart,
> should I not take vengeance on those guilty of the murder,
> after the same fashion bidding me take life for life,

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8 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Aeschylus. *The Libation Bearers.* Trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

driven to fury by the grievous loss of my possessions.
And with my own precious life, he said, I should pay
this debt, enduring many loathsome ills.
For as he revealed to mortals the means of mollifying
malignant powers below the earth, he spoke, naming these
plagues —
leprous ulcers that mount upon the flesh with cruel fangs,
eating away its primal nature;
and a white down sprouting forth upon this infection.
And he spoke of other assaults of the Erinyes,
brought about by the shedding of my father's blood.

(269-84)

Unlike the Furies, the formless Demogorgon cannot be developed into a fully-fledged Gothic figure. Yet, as Shelley casts him in the role of the ultimate force at the core of the Classical universe, Demogorgon must of necessity be associated with the sublimes of power, terror and infinity; in other words, with those qualities most closely associated with the Gothic. In particular, the infinity of Demogorgon is shrouded in a sublimely Gothic obscurity. As Asia and Panthea descend into his realm, they pass:

Down, down!
Through the shade of Sleep,
Through the cloudy strife
Of Death and of Life;
Through the veil and the bar
Of things which seem and are [. . .] .

(II.iii.55-60)

After Asia and Panthea enter the Cave of Demogorgon, they see

> a mighty Darkness
> Filling the seat of power; and rays of gloom
> Dart round, as light from the meridian Sun,
> Ungazed upon and shapeless — neither limb
> Nor form — nor outline; yet we feel it is
> A living Spirit. (II.iv.2-7)

As Burke so clearly states:

> To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. (54)

He continues by stating that nobody "seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton" (Burke 55). He cites the description of Death in Book Two of *Paradise Lost* [9] as an example:

> The other shape,
> If shape it might be call'd that shape had none
> Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,

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9 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from John Milton. *Paradise Lost.* Ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Penguin, 1989.

> Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,
> For each seem'd either; black it stood as Night,
> Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,
> And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem'd his head
> The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on. (Bk II 666-73)

In Burke's own words: "In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree" (Burke 55). This description could be applied just as aptly to the beginning of *Prometheus Unbound* II.iv, and the sublime quality of that passage is certainly not diminished by its obvious origins in Milton's description of Death (Shelley, eds. Reiman and Powers 171n). The sublimely Gothic atmosphere of the ostensibly Classical episode of the cave of Demogorgon is based to a large degree on the Gothic quality of its Miltonic original.

Shelley derived the name, nature and environment of Demogorgon largely from Boccaccio and Spenser. In his *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*, Boccaccio relates that Demogorgon is the primordial forebear of the gods, as Zillman shows in his *Shelley's Prometheus Unbound: A Variorum Edition* :

> [A]nd since he [Boccaccio] finds no reference in any writer to any parents of Demogorgon, he is content to believe that Demogorgon was truly the first of all the gods. He commences his book, therefore, with an imaginary account of Demogorgon. He fancies himself descending into the bowels of the earth through a narrow and rocky defile either in Mount Taenarus or Aetna, passing the Stygian swamps, and arriving at the seat of Demogorgon. Then Demogorgon appears, the

> ancient father of all the gentile and the pagan gods, surrounded
> by clouds and vapour, dwelling in the depths of the earth.
>
> (314)

Shelley is also able to use Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* to good effect in his recreation of Demogorgon. Although the below extract constitutes the sole appearance of the entity in Spenser's poem, it stresses the secret obscurity of his realm, and his close association with Fate. Like so much of *The Faerie Queene,* [10] this stanza is a powerful example of that poem's influential role as a precursor of the Gothic genre:

> Therefore desirous th'end of all their dayes
> To know, and them t'enlarge with long extent,
> By wondrous skill, and many hidden wayes,
> To the three fatall sisters house she went.
> Farre vnder ground from tract of liuing went,
> Downe in the bottome of the deepe *Abysse,*
> Where *Demogorgon* in dull darkenesse pent,
> Farre from the view of Gods and heauens blis,
> The hideous *Chaos* keepes, their dreadfull dwelling is.
>
> (Bk IV. Canto 2. Stanza 47).

The word Demogorgon is of Medieval origin, probably the result of a copyist's error in writing "Demiourgos" or "Demiourgon", the creator

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10 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Edmund Spenser. *The Collected Works of Edmund Spenser.* (1961 reprint). Eds. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt. London: Oxford University Press, 1912.

of the universe in Plato's *Timaeus* 28-40 (Shelley, ed. Zillman 313). It is also possible that this mysterious and all-powerful entity is encountered in Lucan's *Pharsalia.* However, in this work he is not identified by any name, title or description, the witch Erictho referring to him only by his powers and attributes, as she threatens the Furies and infernal gods with his might:

> Assent! — or must I turn to Him
> who's never called without earth shuddering and trembling,
> who whips the cowering Fury with her scourge and looks
> on the unveiled Gorgon, swears by Styx and breaks His oath,
> keeps depths of hell so fathomless that you are His
> Olympian gods? (Bk VI. 745-50)

However, Shelley's own, stated conceptions of the entity appear to be that "[he] is all-knowing; a veiled, shapeless spirit; a mighty darkness who names himself Eternity" (Shelley, ed. Zillman 737). It is possible to see Demogorgon as Nature, which is that part of the Neo-Platonic trinity called the Soul. Nature is the outer manifestation of the Nous, or image of the One, and "leads down to the world of sense of which it is the creator" (Russell 119). In Christian terms, the Neo-Platonic Soul can be seen perhaps as that aspect of God generally known as the Holy Spirit. Whether or not Shelley considered Demogorgon to be a universal spiritual life force, or a manifestation of Necessity, the entity is situated at the centre of the sublime of *Prometheus Unbound*; and his location outside space and time, and the terrifying, mysterious obscurity and power which surrounds him, create a quality of the sublime which opens onto the numinous:

DEMOGORGON. — If the Abysm
Could vomit forth its secrets: — but a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
On the revolving world? what to bid speak
Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these
All things are subject but eternal Love. (II.iv.114-20)

However, the promised oracle of Demogorgon is discovered to be a transcendent echo chamber. Asia only hears repetitions of her own beliefs:

ASIA. So much I asked before, and my heart gave
The response thou hast given; and of such truths
Each to itself must be the oracle. (II.iv.121-23)

Yet far from being denied spiritual insight, her self-knowledge is confirmed and validated by the universal source of wisdom and power. Up until now Shelley, as one who has no allegiance to any religious or spiritual system, has used the Gothic as his only legitimate means of generating any sense of the numinous in the reader. However, it is at this point in the poem that it is seen that, in spite of the intensely Gothic sublime of those passages relating to the realm of Demogorgon, and the powerful sense of the numinous resulting from this, Shelley begins to move beyond the Gothic. It can be tempting to see Demogorgon as the God whom Shelley describes in his "Essay on Christianity" as "the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things [. . .] something mysteriously and illimitably pervading the frame of things" (Shelley, ed. Murray 250); as

an omnipresent power which is felt in its immanent, rather than its transcendent, aspect: but Demogorgon refers to "God, Almighty God" (II.iv.11) as being something quite separate and distinct from himself. His only self-description is as "Eternity — demand no direr name" (III.i.52). The eternal Demogorgon may well manifest himself in Grabo's "creative spirit of man", but his sublimely terrifying yet essentially intangible presence, while not God or the One, has directed and presided over the material and spiritual universes since they came into being. The course of the poem has by now moved almost beyond any of the concrete signs of the Gothic, yet even though the reader has been brought to an acute awareness that "the deep truth is imageless", it is nevertheless the powerful sublime of obscurity, with its highly Gothic Miltonic associations, which has enabled Shelley to present Demogorgon so effectively; and also so sincerely, in a way which fully conforms to his own beliefs that "[w]here indefiniteness ends idolatry and anthropomorphism begin" (Shelley, ed. Murray 252).

The world of Demogorgon can be seen as the ultimate expression of the spirit of Shelley's poetry, and of Romantic poetry in general. As A. W. Schlegel says in his *On Dramatic Art and Literature*, this is

> the expression of the secret attraction to a chaos which lies concealed in the very bosom of the ordered universe, and is perpetually striving after new and marvellous births; the life-giving spirit of primeval love broods here anew on the face of the waters. The former [classical or "ancient" art and poetry] is more simple, clear, and like to nature in the self-existent perfection of her separate works; the latter [Romantic poetry], notwithstanding its fragmentary appearance, approaches more to the secret of the universe. (59)

Asia's descent to the realm of Demogorgon has completed the spiritual re-integration of Prometheus. His total self-knowledge has been achieved through his transcending the Gothic motifs of revenge, curse, and tormented, hopeless quest for liberation; and this realisation is expressed by Demogorgon in IV.570-78, at the poem's transcendent conclusion. As Murphy points out: "More explicitly than any other work, *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-19) indicates the process whereby Gothic elements disappear" (Murphy 146).

III. *Prometheus Unbound* — Heroes and Villains

The Gothic elements in *Prometheus Unbound* disappear as the process of the Titan's spiritual re-integration gains momentum. Essential as the Gothic is to Shelley's realisation of the numinous, its role rapidly becomes redundant once the poem becomes a celebration of love, hope and harmony. The transformation of the Titan's situation involves not only a great alteration in his own perception of reality, but also in our view of his status, as it appears to change from that of Gothic villain to one of Romantic hero, with all that this implies regarding our understanding of his relationship with Jupiter.

This happy resolution of Prometheus' inner conflicts, and their outer manifestations, is totally incompatible with the overall spirit and specific conventions of the Gothic, particularly regarding the figure of the Gothic villain. Varma places this character into three categories. The first type of villain is typified by Walpole's Manfred, in *The Castle of Otranto.* He is a tyrant, motivated primarily by ambition and uncontrolled passion. The second type is that of the embittered victim of destiny, seen in the characters of Falkland in Godwin's *Caleb Williams,* and in Brown's Carwin, from *Wieland.* The third variety of Gothic villain is represented by Eblis in Beckford's *Vathek,* Lucifer in Lewis's *The Monk,* Shelley's eponymous Zastrozzi, and Ginotti from his *St Irvyne, or the Rosicrucian.* This last type of Gothic villain can be seen as "the terrible 'superman' whose ways lie in darkness and whose strength originates far beyond mortal thought. He is a new mintage of the Satan portrayed by Milton in *Paradise Lost* — the immortal outcast, a

masterful, vaunting villain, his spirit unbroken even in defeat" (Varma 216).

The picture of the tormented yet indomitable Titan of Act I of Shelley's greatest work is surely foreshadowed in *Zastrozzi*, in the youthful writer's description of the torture-execution of the villainous Zastrozzi at the hands of the merciless Inquisition:

> Still Zastrozzi stood unmoved, and fearlessly awaited the fiat of his destiny.
>
> The superior whispered to one in black vestments. Four officials rushed in, and placed Zastrozzi on the rack.
>
> Even whilst writhing under the agony of almost insupportable torture [. . .] Zastrozzi's firmness failed him not; but, upon his soul-illumined countenance, played a smile of most disdainful scorn — and, with a wild, convulsive laugh of exulting revenge, he died. (103)

In these final lines from Shelley's early Gothic novel, the protagonist is bound to a rack rather than to a rock, yet crucial words and concepts found here are also prominent in *Prometheus Unbound* I.9-15 — torture, scorn, and revenge.

The exultation of Zastrozzi's last moments on earth are inspired by hatred and revenge, not by any intimations of a life to come. On the other hand, Shelley's other prose villain, Ginotti the Rosicrucian of *St Irvyne*, is led by hatred and hubris to a terrible immortality, comparable to Prometheus' seemingly endless agony of "Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours [. . .] — aye divided by keen pangs [. . .]" (I.12-13):

> At last the bell struck; Ginotti came [. . .] his figure was wasted almost to a skeleton, yet it retained its loftiness and grandeur [. . .] On a sudden Ginotti's frame mouldered to a gigantic skeleton, yet two pale and ghastly flames glared in his eyeless sockets [. . .] Yes, endless existence is thine, Ginotti — a dateless and hopeless eternity of horror.
>
> (198-99)

There is never any reconciliation or harmonious ending for those Gothic villains found in Varma's third category, the one in which we find Prometheus included at the beginning of the poem. They are fated either to share Zastrozzi's just punishment, or to suffer the type of terrible spiritual doom endured by Ginotti or Milton's Satan. Therefore to see Prometheus as a vengeful Gothic villain who has, by cursing Jupiter, inflicted cataclysmic devastation upon the Earth, is to see only one aspect of his whole self. Yet it is not only the superhuman strength and compassion of his essentially divine nature which saves him from the fate of the Gothic villain: it is primarily his renunciation of vengeance, hatred, and self-hatred — those limiting, diminishing qualities so dear to the hearts of the likes of Zastrozzi and Ginotti.

Yet even so, Prometheus the Gothic villain must undergo an agonising process of transformation, as must Prometheus the victim, Prometheus the hero, and Prometheus as Jupiter. Ultimately, the victory of Prometheus is one of renunciation, the relinquishing of vengeance, as he recalls the curse (I.56-59). Shelley's choice of *recall* shows Prometheus's move towards inner wholeness to be as much a process of self-awareness and self-remembrance as one of self-renunciation. All traces of Satanic pride have now disappeared, and soon, disillusioned by the Furies' visions, the Titan will submit all his aspirations for the future

of the human race to the force of Destiny, which is the power of Demogorgon; and also to the power of love, which is far stronger:

> How fair these air-born shapes! and yet I feel
> Most vain all hope but love [. . .]
> I would fain
> Be what it is my destiny to be,
> The saviour and the strength of suffering man,
> Or sink into the original gulph of things . . .
> There is no agony and no solace left;
> Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.
> (I.807-08, 815-20)

Before his renunciation of revenge, Prometheus could be seen as a figure of heroic defiance, resembling Milton's Satan. Now, however, Prometheus appears to be almost Christ-like, as is quite obviously Shelley's intention. The following extract from his *On Christianity* [1] should resolve any doubts concerning these new attributes of the Titan:

> Jesus Christ, instructed his disciples to be perfect as their father in Heaven is perfect, declaring at the same time his belief that human perfection required the refraining from revenge or retribution in any of its various shapes. The perfection of the human and the divine character is thus asserted to be the same: man by resembling God fulfills most accurately the

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1 Taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley — Vol. 1.* Ed. E. B. Murray. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993

> tendencies of his nature, and God comprehends within itself all that constitutes human perfection. (259)

Murphy is only partly correct in stating that "[a]fter his moral victory over Jupiter, however, Prometheus completely loses his villainous Gothic characteristics and is transmuted into a noble hero" (Murphy 150). The Titan certainly ceases to resemble the Gothic villain but, noble and heroic though he undoubtedly is, he is never "transmuted into a noble hero". Prometheus relinquishes his curse in I.303, but following this, during the onslaught of the Furies, we see him as a heroic victim rather than as any definable type of Romantic hero. He is offstage throughout Act II, and virtually disappears from the poem after III.iii.84, but his spirit, however, pervades the whole of the remainder of the work. In this, as also in his "heroism" and subsequent influence, his status is infinitely closer to that of Jesus following his crucifixion, than to that of any "noble" or Romantic hero.

Following the spiritual transformation of Prometheus, that remaining portion of the play subsequent to III.i (excepting IV.338-49) is free of any Gothic qualities, Shelley sustaining the generally elevated and rapturous mood and tone to the poem's conclusion. However, the transcendent atmosphere of the second half of the poem is only made acceptable and credible through its having been developed out of experiences of the numinous arising from the predominantly Gothic moods of the first two Acts. An integral part of this atmosphere, and its associated sublime, is Shelley's presentation of Prometheus as Gothic villain, as a defiant, agonised hero in the mould of the Satan of Books 1 and 2 of *Paradise Lost.*

Another essential source of Gothic atmosphere is the figure of Jupiter as the embodiment of implacable vengeance, relentless cruelty,

all-pervading corruption and self-serving power. In I.231-39, these qualities are powerfully communicated in Shelley's brief description of the god's Phantasm, which is initially apprehended as a subterranean whirlwind. Even though these lines are a description of a shade or image rather than an actual entity, these few words are imbued with the sublimes of terror and power so graphically manifested at the beginning of the work. Jupiter is apparently omnipotent, and his might is made manifest in the horrific, apocalyptic devastation wrought upon the Earth following the revolt of Prometheus against the heartless tyrant. In I.165-79, Shelley emphasises in graphically Gothic images the disgustingly toxic, corrupting, decaying aspects of Jupiter's power.

However, it is in the torments he inflicts upon Prometheus that we most clearly see that it is Jupiter who most predominantly fills the role of Gothic villain, as opposed to Prometheus himself. Jupiter easily fits into Varma's third category of Gothic villains as, like the examples of Beckford's Eblis and Lewis's Lucifer, he "is the terrible 'superman' whose ways lie in darkness and whose strength originates far beyond mortal thought" (Varma 216). Although in Act I, the indirect descriptions of ravines and cliffs contribute markedly to a sublime of terror, this quality, together with any associated sense of the numinous, arises chiefly out of the terror evoked by the contemplation of the enormities inflicted upon the Titan, by the arrival of the Furies, and from the overarching sublime of Jupiter's power. As Burke says:

> Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous [. . .] Indeed

> terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime. (53-54)

Regarding power, Burke says that this category of the sublime arises naturally

> from terror, the common stock of every thing that is sublime [. . .] And indeed the ideas of pain, and above all of death, are so very affecting, that whilst we remain in the presence of whatever is supposed to have the power of inflicting either, it is impossible to be perfectly free from terror [. . .] In short, wheresoever we find strength, and in what light soever we look upon power, we shall all along observe the sublime the concomitant of terror [. . .] . (59, 61)

When we first encounter Prometheus, he has long been "[n]ailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mountain" (I.20), and in I.31-40, we are soon made fully aware of the terrifying extent of Jupiter's merciless power. Yet Jupiter's unlimited power and cruelty only becomes fully apparent in I.352-70, with the arrival of the Furies, heralded by Mercury. Mercury, the messenger of the gods, here assumes the role of a reluctant, yet fearfully compliant, agent of state-enforced judicial torture, that most terrifying of all expressions of the terrible sublime of the power of a ruling elite.

Before this present century of mass extermination and the widespread use of torture, it was the Roman Catholic Inquisitions of Spain and Italy which were the most terrifying manifestations of the power of the state, or at least of a state religion which largely controlled the lives of the populace. Mercury's attitude, pitying though it may be,

demonstrates a variety of that slavish subjugation to a religion and a government which are capable of inflicting the horrors which Lewis so chillingly anticipates in *The Monk*, in his account of the activities of the Spanish Inquisition:

> He was conducted into a spacious Hall, hung with black cloth. At the Table sat three grave stern-looking Men, also habited in black: One was the Grand Inquisitor, whom the importance of this cause had induced to examine into it himself. At a smaller table at a little distance sat the Secretary, provided with all necessary implements for writing. Ambrosio was beckoned to advance, and take his station at the lower end of the Table. As his eye glanced downwards, He perceived various iron instruments lying scattered upon the floor. Their forms were unknown to him, but apprehension immediately guessed them to be engines of torture. He turned pale, and with difficulty prevented himself from sinking upon the ground. (431)

Like the torturers of the Inquisition, the immediate challenge of the Furies is to extract Prometheus' secret from his breast, "[t]he fear of which perplexes the Supreme . . ." (I.374). As we have already seen in I.338-40, the Furies eagerly anticipate their task. The following lines show similar sentiments felt by inquisitors who have none of Mercury's weak, yet compassionate, reluctance. The torturers in Radcliffe's *The Italian* [2] can barely conceal their sadistic blood-lust:

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2 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from Ann Radcliffe. *The Italian*. Ed. Frederick Garber. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

> Inquisitors, in their long black robes, issued, from time to time, from the passages, and crossed the hall to other avenues. They eyed the prisoners with curiosity, but without pity. Their visages, with few exceptions, seemed stamped with the characters of demons. Vivaldi could not look upon the grave cruelty, or the ferocious impatience, their countenances severally expressed, without reading in them the fate of some fellow creature [. . .] . (197)

In describing to his contemporary readers the tortures of Prometheus by the inescapable, implacable power of Jupiter, it is understandable that Shelley should take advantage of the Gothic sublime of such authors as Radcliffe and Lewis, whose exploitation of Inquisition atmosphere and subject matter is so powerfully evocative of the sublimes of power and terror. The Inquisition is also productive of that variety of the sublime listed by Burke as privation, and especially of what he calls the privations of vacuity, darkness, solitude and silence (Burke 65); and, with particular relevance to the Inquisition, we note Burke's statement that "the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime" (Burke 79).

Apart from the powerful effects of the varieties of the sublime evoked even by the mere mention of the Inquisition, the sadistic, pathological practices of the Holy Office embody self-delusion and the perversion of truth and goodness in a manner strikingly analogous to the reign of Jupiter, as described in I.4-8. As Varma states so succinctly in *The Gothic Flame*:

> Although Catholicism alone is never used by Gothic novelists as a means of evoking terror, and although there are

> no direct theological attacks, the implication is always that religion when abused becomes a horrible and ghastly perversion. Thus it is the incidental vestments, not the doctrine of Catholicism, that serve as a source of terror [. . .] The Inquisition remains one of the stock sources of horror in the Gothic novel, a tremendous monument of the power, crime, and gloom of the human mind. (219-20)

In spite of the Furies' terrifying utterances and obscene gloating, their horrific threats are in fact metaphors of the spiritual damage they intend to inflict on the Titan in response to his continuing defiance of Jupiter. The visions they show him of the squalid failure and devaluation of enlightened and heroic human endeavour, of the apparently inevitable corruption of ideals, and of the never-ending cycle of needless human suffering, are intended to drive him to despair; a state of mind which will, according to medieval theology, lead quickly to damnation. More specifically, in pursuing his intention to reduce Prometheus to a state of ineffectual despair (I.635-45), their master Jupiter sees the only way in which he can bring about the Titan's spiritual defeat, and safely perpetuate his own illusory reign.

Here are heard more than echoes of Shelley's favourite novel, *Wieland.* This is Charles Brockden Brown's cautionary tale which relates the harrowing tragedy of a man whose own private, self-constructed, self-imposed religion leads him to murder his family in a blood sacrifice, and then to kill himself. In fact, the novel's theme of self-imposed subjugation to self-destructive illusion can be closely compared to that of *Prometheus Unbound.* The tragic events which ultimately destroy Wieland are triggered by the sinister irresponsibility of the mysterious Carwin the biloquist, whose imitations of the voice of the

Almighty finally induce in Wieland a type of psychosis, in which state he is commanded to sacrifice his family:

> "Let him be undeceived in this respect, and what floods of despair and of horror will overwhelm him! Instead of glowing approbation and serene hope, will he not hate and torture himself?" [. . .]
>
> Presently I considered that whether Wieland was a maniac, a faithful servant of his God, the victim of hellish illusions, or the dupe of human imposture, was by no means certain [. . .] "A fury that is rapacious of blood, that lifts his strength almost above that of mortals, that bends all his energies to the destruction of whatever was once dear to him, possesses him wholly". (206-07)

Even the language here foreshadows words and images in Shelley's great poem. For example, "a fury that is rapacious of blood" symbolises the inner demon that tortures both Wieland and Prometheus with the self-deluding visions that can lead to ultimate despair.

Unlike the hero of Byron's *Manfred*, [3] Prometheus sees no victory in death. It appears likely that Shelley's version of Aeschylus's Titan developed from the poet's desire to correct what he felt were undesirable aspects of Byron's hero, and that the life-affirming Prometheus was created largely to contrast with Byron's debatably heroic symbol of defiant self-destruction (Robinson 125-134). Certainly, Manfred is situated at the end "of a long tradition of heroes. He is representative of

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3 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from George Gordon, Lord Byron. *Byron*. Ed. Jerome J. McGann. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

almost every one of the hero-types of the Romantic movement, and he is the one hero in English literature of whom this can truthfully be said" (Thorslev 167). Yet, hero or not, Manfred's ultimate goal is a defiant, unrepentant self-destruction:

> *Thou* didst not tempt me, and thou couldst not tempt me;
> I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey —
> But was my own destroyer, and will be
> My own hereafter. — Back, ye baffled fiends!
> The hand of death is on me — but not yours!
>
> (*Manfred*, III.iv.137-41)

It is not only the poet's heroes who contrast so strongly with each other. Shelley's Jupiter and Byron's Arimanes also differ markedly, insofar as in the creation of the former, "Shelley withdrew the ontological independence of Byron's Arimanes and reduced him to a 'phantasm' that was merely a product of man's miscreative mind" (Robinson 133). It is Prometheus himself who has given the tyrannical Jupiter "all / He has, and in return he chains me here / Years, ages, night and day" (I.381-83). Prometheus, as the spirit of humanity, has created a phantom from his own fears and negativity. Shelley shows the human race as having, in the same perverse manner, willingly, even enthusiastically, enslaved itself to false beliefs. This is the illusory tyrant of which Shelley writes in *On Christianity*:

> What! after death shall their awakened eyes behold the King of Heaven, shall they stand in awe before the golden throne on which he sits, and gaze upon the venerable countenance of the paternal Monarch. Is this the reward of the virtuous and the

> pure? These are the idle dreams of the visionary or the pernicious representations of impostors who have fabricated from the very materials of wisdom a cloak for their own dwarfish and imbecile conceptions. (250-51)

It is ontological as much as epistemological confusion which lies at the heart of the plight of Prometheus, and of the human race; so it is only right that problematical ontology should be so crucial to its resolution. In III.i.18-23 — in a speech which, in spirit at least, closely resembles that spoken by God in a parallel scene in *Paradise Lost*, Book 6, lines 680-718 — Jupiter tells his cohorts of his consolidated power, and of his almighty son, his own saviour. Jupiter believes that his son, like the warrior son of God in Book 6 of *Paradise Lost*, will defeat his rebellious enemy; in this instance, "the soul of man, like unextinguished fire" (III.i.5). Jupiter's son, like Jesus himself, is the product of a prodigious conception; but in Jupiter's case the generative process can be seen as one of pollution rather than of benediction, and although the act is of itself prodigious, the only resulting conception resides in the mind of Jupiter. The saviour son is a non-being, as is his illusory father. The eagerly awaited offspring is Demogorgon, Eternity, who will arrive to effect the Nemesis of a family reunion. Jupiter only exists in the temporality of the human mind, and so must ultimately give way to Eternity, which is seen as his successor as much as his antecedent (Grabo 95-96). Just as Jupiter overthrew his father, Saturn, he will, in turn, be defeated by his own son, and dragged by Demogorgon into the abyss (III.i.53-56). As Jupiter revels in gloating anticipation of his victory, he invites Thetis to share in his future triumph, referring to the conception of Demogorgon. This resulted from Jupiter's rape of Thetis, during which he ignored her agonised cries as she received his vile,

corrosive seed (III.i.37-42). In Earl R. Wasserman's expressive words: "Thetis is crying out against the corruptive annihilation of her body by that supreme evil beneath which, if it were omnipotent, even the Earth would vanish like thin mist" (Wasserman 290-91). The utterly negative quality of what Wasserman terms "a sterile rape" is likened by its victim to the result of the bite of the Numidian seps, the ludicrously hideous and graphically Gothic description of which is given in Lucan's *Pharsalia*:

> Around the edge of the bite
> the flesh dissolved and fell away to bare the pale
> bones, and still dissolving left a gaping fleshless
> hole. His limbs drip tainted blood, his calves are pus,
> the knee-bones stand exposed, thigh-muscles melt and black
> corruption oozes from his groin. (Bk IX. 767-72)

In his hideous attempt to conceive a son, Jupiter is seen as perpetrating the ultimate crime of the Gothic villain, and is placed firmly in the company not only of Beckford's Eblis, but also of Lewis's Ambrosio.

IV. *The Cenci* — An Absence of the Numinous

The Gothic style and atmosphere of *The Cenci*, as well as the overall ambience of its theme and setting, are largely derived from the Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies, which are generally considered to be the earliest antecedents of the Gothic genre in English literature. According to Mary Shelley, her husband was largely unacquainted with English medieval works, and his access to Gothic medievalism was primarily by way of the German Romantics, and also through Italian writers of the middle ages and early Renaissance, such as Dante and Petrarch (Punter 106). So the earliest works in English — apart from Spenser's *Faerie Queene* — to have exerted any sort of "Gothic" influence on Shelley, were the darker plays of Shakespeare such as *Titus Andronicus, Richard III, Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth*, and the revenge tragedies of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, particularly those of Beaumont and Fletcher. These plays contain the themes of murder, revenge, family violence, and the tyrannical power of the patriarchal Church and State which Shelley discusses consistently throughout his work, but never in such concentrated form as we see them presented in *The Cenci*.

Although the theme and plot of Shelley's play are based closely on the factual, tragically sordid history of the Cenci family of late sixteenth-century Rome, as well as more generally on the Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies, many of the Gothic outer trappings and atmospheric devices of *The Cenci* are of the type found in the Gothic novels written by English and American authors from around 1760 until the early 1820s. Count Francesco Cenci's castle of Petrella is

> safely walled, and moated round about:
> Its dungeons underground, and its thick towers
> Never told tales; though they have heard and seen
> What might make dumb things speak. (II.i.169-72)

in the tradition of the Gothic nightmares of Lewis and Radcliffe. In similar vein, the Roman Cenci Palace, as Shelley knew it in 1819, is described in the poem's preface as being, in spite of extensive modernisation, "a vast and gloomy pile of feudal architecture in the same state as during the dreadful scenes which are the subject of this tragedy" (242).

The natural landscape is equally threatening and overpowering. Shelley's account of the route to the castle-prison of Petrella (III.i.257-65) is a powerfully evocative description of a Gothic scene imbued with an underlying terror, and an unnatural darkness which foreshadows the moral and spiritual night awaiting the Cencis. Equally Gothic are the themes of imprisonment, abuse of power, religious hypocrisy, corrupt Catholic clergy, and inquisitional torture and execution; features which *The Cenci* shares with many other works in the same or similar genre, ranging from Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* to Lewis's *The Monk*. The latter's Father Ambrosio has many of the less desirable traits of the prelate Orsino in Shelley's play, and Count Francesco Cenci is only a somewhat more depraved version of that seminal Gothic character, Walpole's Manfred, prince of Otranto. Yet Shelley takes Count Francesco's depravity to the limit, and for sheer self-serving, wilfully corrupting evil, and physical and emotional sadism, Cenci is presented as the ultimate Gothic villain. And we can see Beatrice, the victim of verbal abuse, imprisonment, food deprivation, humiliation, rape, incest, sodomy (if the historical facts have been correctly interpreted) and church-

sanctioned torture and execution, as the quintessential abused heroine of the Gothic novel, someone whose experiences equal, and sometimes surpass, the worst excesses of cruelty and degradation inflicted on female protagonists in *The Monk*.

In *The Cenci*, the nature of the physical surroundings assists immeasurably in communicating plot and depicting character. The palace and castle of the count embody his suppressive, threatening, sinister traits, and apparently invulnerable status; and they also constitute the sites where these embodied qualities manifest themselves to the full. Shelley has already begun to create these suggestive environments in the last lines of the poem's preface: "One of the gates of the palace formed of immense stones and leading through a passage, dark and lofty and opening into gloomy subterranean chambers, struck me particularly" (242). As Murphy points out: "One easily sees how this entrance conveniently becomes a merging of physical and psychological reality, and the ensuing darkness indeed envelops both body and soul" (Murphy 156). This entrance to the Cenci Palace can clearly be seen as Hell's Gate, insofar as it leads to a place where Beatrice's father not only subjects her to endless torments in this life, but creates the unendurable misery which causes her descent into spiritual darkness.

Another such place of ingress to the infernal regions is the terror-inspiring ravine, the subject of the most extended and sustained example of Gothic landscape description in the poem, which is also the proposed site for the murder of the count. Driven by despair as much as by any desire for revenge, and encouraged by the devious Orsino, Beatrice, Lucretia and Giacomo have taken the irrevocable first step towards their own damnation, whether we see their motives as justified or not. According to contemporary theology, despair, together with presumption, was the state of mind which made the soul most vulnerable

to Satanic temptation. So when Beatrice sees God's accredited agents — her father, the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope — ranged against her (III.i.207-28), she turns her back on God in her despair, and presumes to do God's work for him in executing justice and vengeance upon her father. Although this murder attempt comes to nothing, Beatrice has now taken the irreversible step towards becoming a true Cenci (III.i.272-73), as guilty of murder now as her father has ever been.

The description in III.i.247-51 and III.i.257 of the rock suspended over the ravine — an image symbolising, amongst other things, the precarious state of Beatrice's soul prior to her father's murder — is the only portion of the play which can be identified as having been taken directly from another writer (Keach 63-65). As Shelley says in his notes to the poem: "An idea in this speech was suggested by a most sublime passage in *El Purgatorio de San Patricio* of Calderon: the only plagiarism which I have intentionally committed in the whole piece" (Shelley, eds. Reiman and Powers 241n). In the poem's preface, Shelley also writes of this passage:

> I have avoided with great care in writing this play the introduction of what is commonly called mere poetry, and I imagine there will scarcely be found a detached simile or a single isolated description, unless Beatrice's description of the chasm appointed for her father's murder should be judged to be of that nature. (241)

However, as Keach points out in *Shelley's Style*:

> This speech [. . .] is anything but an intrusion of what Shelley calls "mere poetry", of "detached simile" and "isolated

> description". The images fuse Beatrice's state of mind moments after the incestuous rape with the wild landscape she regards both in recollection and anticipation, and they are intricately linked with the play's recurrent patterns of imagery.
>
> (64)

The description of the huge, unstable rock "[w]hich has, from unimaginable years, / Sustained itself with terror and with toil / Over a gulf" (III.i.248-50) follows Calderón's original very closely. It is a strikingly evocative Gothic image which powerfully conveys the despairing inertia of Beatrice, as she suffers beneath the relentless weight of her fate, anticipating the ultimate desecration of her body and soul, and the inevitable descent of her former innocence into the infernal gulf. Her spiritual plight is so powerfully symbolised by the rock which,

> [e]ven as a wretched soul hour after hour,
> Clings to the mass of life; yet clinging, leans;
> And leaning, makes more dark the dread abyss
> In which it fears to fall [. . .] . (III.i.252-55)

The imagery is seen to be particularly apt when it is realised that Calderón's original passage was a description of the entrance to Hell.

The Gothic imagery of the play has its most immediate impact when it is used directly to describe the speaker's current situation and state of mind. At the same time, the play's Gothic conventions allow a far more telling, concrete and specific variety of imagery to be used in the direct communication of inner conditions than would be the case in a genre which is less theatrical, and less accommodating of extremes. In *The Cenci,* the most shockingly graphic Gothic imagery is put to

excellent use as characters describe the anguished turmoil of their inner states. For example, Beatrice expresses her reaction to incestuous rape in III.i.12-28, a passage which so powerfully conveys her sense of inner and outer defilement and spiritual contamination, and shows us that, for her, any remaining vision of decency or beauty in the world has finally vanished forever, leaving her with a sense of inhabiting a dark, claustrophobic, suffocating abode of the dead. [1] This is followed by an hallucinatory speech (III.i.42-48), in which Beatrice's innermost feelings are, again, strongly communicated by the Gothic imagery; yet this is a speech where this same imagery also describes those actual physical occurrences experienced in the past, which are now so symbolic of her present state of mind.

We have seen that *The Cenci* is the most consistently Gothic of all the poetry written by Shelley from 1818 to the end of his life. The drama's settings and landscape descriptions communicate an all-pervading atmosphere of the Gothic, and the characters and the plot are largely the product of a potently Gothic amalgamation of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama — particularly the revenge tragedy — and the English and American Gothic novels produced after 1760. Yet the supernatural, which is perhaps the most important, and certainly the most characteristic quality of Gothic literature, is completely absent from Shelley's play; and it is this supernatural element which is crucial in enabling any sense of the numinous to enter the work.

However close the relationship may be between the sublime and

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1 Regarding Shelley's general disclaimer of plagiarism in the preface to *The Cenci*, III.i.26-28 is remarkably similar to a portion of Clarence's speech in *Richard III* I.iv.37-41: "[B]ut still the envious flood / Stopped in my soul, and would not let it forth / To find the empty, vast, and wandering air, / But smothered it within my panting bulk, / Who almost burst to belch it in the sea".

the numinous, a distinction between the two is clearly seen in *The Cenci.* We are moved and overawed by the sublime terror of the Gothic imagery of the description of the ravine, and also by our surprised awareness of its relationship to the enormities of Beatrice's suffering and moral dilemma; and other categories of the sublime are effectively brought into play throughout the work — the sublime of darkness or obscurity, the sublime of imprisonment or confinement, and the sublime of the vastness of the works of man and Nature; and ultimately the sublime of the corrosive, materialistic power of the Count, and of the Papal Church and State, together with the sublime of our astonishment at the results of the all-enveloping, corrupting, infecting evil of Francesco Cenci. Yet however powerful an effect Shelley's use of the sublime may have on our feelings, however much we may be held in awe of the corruption, inhumanity and devastating suffering portrayed, and be finally overwhelmed by the play's ending, we have experienced none of that sense of transcendence, that atmosphere of unearthly wonder, that hint, however faint, of some satisfyingly transforming or resolving quality in a universe not entirely devoid of meaning, which we experience in far lesser works, such as Lewis's *The Monk.* This most "Gothic" of all Shelley's later works is the one from which any sense of the numinous is entirely absent.

The Gothic quality in *The Cenci* is almost entirely subterranean, to use an architectural analogy. The whole play is informed by the atmosphere of the crypt and the charnel house, with no hint of the Heavenward aspiration of pillar, arch or spire, which constitutes at least a part of the spirit of most characteristically Gothic works. The emotional climax of the play takes place when Beatrice is brought face to face with her imminent execution. The Papal state has consigned her to the block for presuming to defend herself against the depredations of her father,

crimes for which, ironically, the State had belatedly sentenced her father to the same punishment which she herself now faces. God, the Pope, the Church and Count Cenci become one in her agonised mind, all of them omnipotent, all of them determined to corrupt and destroy her. If any afterlife can be imagined in so corrupt a universe, it is the nightmare vision revealed in V.iv.57-72, of an almighty Count Cenci, wrapping her eternally in his foul embrace, the depraved, all-powerful, ever-present being who is her progenitor, her creator, and whose vile spirit will merge with hers for evermore. This is a Gothic vision — almost a waking version of the typically Gothic dream-vision — yet one which communicates nothing of the numinous. Just as in a transcendent or mystical experience, the subject's individual human consciousness will merge with the Oneness of its creator, and will lose all sense of its own individuality, so will Beatrice, after death, partake of the spirit of her earthly father. Although she insists on her innocence, she and her innocent mother and siblings will be branded for all eternity with "the name of the father", as with the mark of Cain (V.iv.145-54); and in spite of her mother's echoing the comforting words of the crucified Christ: "[E]re night / Think we shall be in Paradise" (V.iv.76-77), she feels there is no longer any power in the Universe in which she can place her trust (V.iv. 77-89).

In the absence of the possibility of any positive outcome, in this world or the next, the play's Gothic qualities are used to highlight problems of identity and self-identification, and the resulting feelings of despair and worthlessness. Interestingly, Shelley's early Gothic novels, *Zastrozzi* and *St Irvyne*, contain significant material relevant both to the subject of identity, and to that of the destruction of the soul; and elements from these works are present in *The Cenci*. The respective Gothic villains of these novels are the eponymous Zastrozzi, and

Nempere from *St Irvyne*. Zastrozzi not only wants to destroy his enemy's body but, like Count Cenci, also his soul. In *St Irvyne*, the sinister Nempere manipulates the hero's life from afar, intending to destroy ultimately the soul of the hero and the body of the hero's sister. The villain's name suggests nom pere — the name of the father — and Cenci is the name of Beatrice's father, the name of someone who, like Nempere, manipulates the lives of his victims in order to bring about their physical and spiritual destruction; the name of the father which will disfigure and damn all those who bear it; the antithesis of the saving name of God which has been, unhappily, obscured by the corrupt Church and perverted by its mercenary, manipulative representatives (Michasiw 209-10).

As in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's most "Gothic" play, "[f]air is foul, and foul is fair". In a society of perverted, mercenary values, those relationships which are normally the closest are frequently seen as being based on deceit, manipulation and self-interest, appearances often bearing little relationship to reality. The world is seen as "unnatural", in the sense that the word is used in *Macbeth*, as well as in the manner in which it is both symbolised and manifested in the relationship of Beatrice and her father. That which should be good is evil. The foundations of society, civilization, life itself, are riddled with corruption and cruelty. And with the creator as a conscious, wilful agent of corruption, how can the creature escape the ultimate descent into degradation and evil, its spiritual descent being brought about as much by nurture as by heredity? In Shelley's play, there is no Promethean figure to cope with the patriarchal tyranny of Count Cenci, the State or the Church.

Corrupted religion and religious hypocrisy, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church, had featured strongly in what can be broadly considered as the Gothic genre since the beginning of the Counter-

Reformation. Although the faults of Angelo in *Measure for Measure* are likely to have been considered by a contemporary audience to be more characteristic of Protestant Puritans than of their Catholic counterparts, the genre from its earliest days produced a rapidly-increasing quantity of hooded, dark-robed priests, monks and nuns who were generally dissolute, hypocritical and sadistic. These frustrated sociopaths would frequently engage in assorted acts of forbidden sexuality, torture, blasphemy, Satanism and political expediency, which were carried out largely in the sublimely dark and terrifying environments of crypts, cells, dungeons, tombs or torture chambers; or in an equally Gothic landscape of towering cliffs and plunging chasms, ruined, deserted chapels and lonely, isolated castles. In *The Cenci* (V.iv.1-5), this self-serving, anti-Christian culture of cruelty, greed and sensuality is protected by the inflexible, inhuman power of the Papal State, which will not hesitate in eliminating any threat to its authority.

In V.iv.15-24, it is made clear that Beatrice's murder of her father is a direct threat to the security of the patriarchal State and Church, and cannot go unpunished, however justifiable the act must seem to all. The Pope's final ironic words of the lines referred to above — "[a]uthority, and power, and hoary hair / Are grown crimes capital" — have a much deeper irony in their literal truth. The whole fabric of the Roman establishment is so riddled with crime and exploitation that the ordinary citizen would be executed for committing crimes far less serious than the everyday activities of so many wealthy Romans living under Papal protection. And the sense of guilt and contamination which Count Cenci has inflicted on his daughter can be seen as illustrating the result of the process of hegemony, by which the powerful contrive to make the ordinary individual experience guilt for a situation brought about by those in power themselves. (An example of the results of this process

can be seen in the "guilt" of the unemployed in a society such as our own, in which unemployment is created as an economic and political tool.). Shelley would have felt this very strongly at the time that he was writing *The Cenci*, in 1819, the year of the Peterloo Massacre and *The Mask of Anarchy*. The self-destructive guilt and sense of worthlessness imposed on the oppressed and exploited are forcefully expressed by Beatrice in III.i.95-99, when she contemplates her father's murder.

Beatrice herself, although desiring revenge, has not the concentrated, obsessive hatred of the typical Gothic villain (and although it can be seen to be in the lineage of the revenge tragedies, the revenge theme in *The Cenci* itself is not over-ridingly powerful). In fact she can scarcely be considered a villain, as her killing her father is at least as much motivated by a desperate quest for her own safety and that of her loved ones, as by any wish for revenge; and Carlos Baker's careful analysis notwithstanding, the Count's revenge on his late wife, unexplained as it is, seems an unsatisfactory motive for his sheer delight in the sexual and physical abuse, murder and spiritual corruption of their children (Baker 144-47).

The climax of the play (V.iv.57-72) is Beatrice's terrible vision of her father "[m]asked in grey hairs and wrinkles" (V.iv.65) filling the universe, enveloping her in eternal foulness. This hideous revelation impresses with a combination of the sublime categories of astonishment, "lampless" obscurity, confinement, but most of all of power, the universal power of Jupiter's evil universe. This is a passage which conveys a powerfully Gothic sublime enabling us to apprehend the issues expressed in the play in a manner impossible if couched in conventional terminology, or in a more "realistic" literary style or genre (Watt 9-34). Yet there is nothing of the numinous in this passage, nothing that illuminates, however faintly or fitfully, any escape from a universe of evil.

The only passage in *The Cenci* containing any hint of the numinous is the description of the ravine, and this passage cannot be considered as Shelley's. It describes the road to Hell, but where there is Hell, there must also be a Heaven, and the possibility of freedom from the presence of Count Francesco Cenci. In this passage, we are over-awed by the sublime quality of the landscape, and although the Gothic imagery relates to Beatrice's inner suffering, we are still able to feel those sensations of wonderment initially evoked by the view, which lend a dimension of hope and nobility to her misery, in a way comparable to the effects of classical tragedy. In Beatrice's vision of eternity, on the other hand, we can see the ultimate results of the Cenci family's "self-anatomy" (Baker 143-44). Taking a stage further Orsino's analysis of this (II.ii.108-14), Curran, in his *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis*, further emphasises the tragic unreality of a world in which any idea of the supremacy of love and truth must seem an empty dream:

> Here is the obverse of the anarchy celebrated in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*, as just an argument for the urgency of dictatorial order as Hobbes might have designed. To delve into the mind is to cast off social restraints, to retreat into onanistic gratification of the senses and into the solipsism of the isolated ego. The resulting existential void, lacking either external order or internal restraint, breeds the monomaniacal craving for power that motivates Cenci, as well as the authoritarian assertion of it by the Pope, who becomes, in Camillo's words, "A rite, a law, a custom: not a man" (V.iv.5). The deeper that Beatrice penetrates her own values and faiths, the less firm she discovers their foundation to be; thrown upon the welter of experience, ideals of justice, benevolence, and

> fraternity, are swamped. Asia can accept the maxim that "The deep truth is imageless" (II.iv.116), yet float freely on the swell of music, trusting her intuitions and the supremacy of love. But Beatrice through three acts of the tragedy likewise cannot articulate the "firm, enduring truth" (III.i.61) she knows to be expressed in her violation: "I [. . .] can feign no image in my mind / Of that which has transformed me" (III.i.108-09) [. . .] Self-analysis produces not assurances and adjustments, but abrogations: distrust of the world continually impinging on one's consciousness, a fear of persecution and its corollary, a defensive will to persecute. (125)

Beatrice's self-analysis does not result in real self-knowledge, which lies outside the domain of the analytical mind and the ordinary egotistical self, in the realms, or at least in the borderlands, of the numinous. (The quality of self-analysis is entirely dependent on the quality of the self which analyses, and is strictly modified by the motives of rationalised self-interest which generally steer that self. Genuine self-knowledge can originate only from the non-pragmatic domain of the irrational, as Socrates himself found at the Delphic Oracle.) Her "self-anatomy", which has led to the murder of her father and its catastrophic results, can only lead her to an ultimate, albeit illusory, awareness of her eternal links with a father who has defiled and destroyed her. This apprehension of "eternity" has no numinous qualities whatsoever. The epistemological foundation of *The Cenci* is a closed circuit of spiritual darkness which impinges on the ontological horror of unending self-identification with that which is most loathsome and horrifying.

All the above rules out the consideration of there being any similarity between *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound,* as Baker makes clear in *Shelley's Major Poetry*:

> The contrast between *Prometheus* and *The Cenci* is the contrast between what might be and what is. As in the *Prometheus*, Shelley subjected his central figure to all the diabolical rapier-thrusts and bludgeonings that mind and flesh could bear. But this time the reaction was more complicated, as the individual human being is always more complicated than any symbol which can be devised for him. This time no ethical conversion renovated the world. Instead, under indignities of the most horrible kind, a gentle and innocent girl was turned into an efficient machine of vengeance, coolly planning, imperiously executing, denying her part in, and at last calmly dying for the murder of her father. After it was over, history, that "record of crimes and miseries" in human society, moved on as before. (142)

The world of *The Cenci* is circumscribed by "what is". The plot and characterisations are limited by the reality which was the play's inspiration. The tale is such that it is impossible to move far outside the bounds of the historical narrative without destroying the essence of the historical basis of the story, which was so important to Shelley. However, in contemplating and writing *The Cenci,* Shelley was bound by a variety of the historical materialism and ideas about Necessity which he had rejected years earlier, a way of thought entirely inimical to any serious application of the numinous, or to even the faintest vision of the ideal.

V. Leonardo's *Medusa* and the Limits of the Sublime

In his short poem of 1819, "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery", [1] Shelley presents the reader with a paradoxically alluring distillation of all the noxious horrors of the Eumenides of Aeschylus, gracefully framed in a quintessentially Gothic setting; and although Praz is quite clearly indulging in a sweeping sensationalism when he states that the poem "amounts almost to a manifesto of the conception of Beauty peculiar to the Romantics" (Praz 25), it cannot be denied that, although the "glassy-eyed, severed female head" did not constitute the sole "object of the dark loves of the Romantics and the Decadents throughout the whole of the century" (Praz 26-27), objects of desire increasingly did consist of women subjected to multifarious varieties of sickness, deformity, privation, torment and death:

> It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
> Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;
> Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;
> Its horror and its beauty are divine.
> Upon its lips and eyelids seem to lie
> Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,
> Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
> The agonies of anguish and of death. (1-8)

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1 All quotations from this poem are taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Works of P. B. Shelley*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994.

This is Shelley's description of the severed head of Medusa, the snake-haired sister of the similarly-coiffured Eumenides, an entity whose face, living or dead, radiates such hatred and evil, that a mere glimpse of it will turn the viewer to stone. It is clear that in this poem, the poet intended to communicate forcefully the sublime of terror which he had so obviously experienced in Florence's Uffizi Gallery in his contemplation of that painting formerly attributed to Leonardo; and with this terror, perhaps, an associated awareness of the numinous (Hildebrand 150). In theory, at least, Shelley would have been justified in having expectations of these results, as can be seen here from an amplification of an extract I have previously quoted from Burke's *Enquiry*:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (36)

The Gorgon's severed head reposes in a sublime landscape: "Below, far lands are seen tremblingly" (3), while in lines 25-32 the effects and trappings of the more immediate setting show the Gothic style pushed, almost ludicrously, to its limits. Also, lines 31 and 32 — "and the midnight sky / Flares, a light more dread than obscurity" — bring to mind the Gothic sublime of Satan's first views of his new dwelling place in Book I of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the powerful sublime of the obscure associated with these profound impressions:

At once as far as Angel's ken he views
The dismal Situation waste and wild,
A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round
As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Serv'd only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all [. . .] . (Bk I. 59-67)

These lines describe a situation comparable to Medusa's tortured existence, if it is possible to describe her state as being such. A powerful, primal being, like Satan himself, Medusa's potent, petrifying eyes still gaze miraculously at the midnight sky. Satan, on the other hand, takes stock of his "dismal Situation waste and wild", after recovering from his fall from Heaven. In spite of his sublime courage, Satan is now "where peace / And rest can never dwell, hope never comes / That comes to all". Similarly, "the agonies of anguish and of death" still dwell eternally beneath the hideous loveliness of Medusa's face.

Yet for all the wealth of horrific atmosphere and detail, and in spite of literary associations which could be assumed to guarantee powerfully sublime qualities, the final effect of "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci" is far from terrifying in any conventional, or generally perceptible, sense. There is no arousal of suspense, or of any of that sense of astonishment resulting from shock or revelation, and, in spite of the disturbingly graphic delineation of the poem's subject matter, any feelings of revulsion we may have, or any vicarious experiencing of pain, are negligible when compared to sensations experienced in reading the more harrowing and gruesome episodes from such works as Lewis's

The Monk. The genesis of Shelley's poem as a composed image within set borders gives rise to a sense of the static, and an awareness of a lack of direction; and the poem's failure to arouse any feelings approaching those of fear, suspense or uncertainty rules out any appearance of the numinous. However, a variety of the sublime is still to be found in the poem. Describing the aesthetic process which developed from Burke's theories, Praz states in *The Romantic Agony* that:

> [t]he discovery of Horror as a source of delight and beauty ended by reacting on men's actual conception of beauty itself: the Horrid, from being a category of the Beautiful, ended by becoming one of its essential elements, and the "beautifully horrid" passed by insensible degrees into the "horribly beautiful". (27)

In stating that the above process developed from Burke's theories, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the later Romantics were moving away from a general acceptance of his ideas towards a less categorical separation of the sublime and the beautiful. This can be seen as a movement towards earlier, and equally valid, views of the sublime and the beautiful, views which Burke himself had set out to correct and reform. As he states in the preface to the first edition of the *Enquiry*:

> He [the author] observed that the ideas of the sublime and beautiful were frequently confounded; and that both were indiscriminately applied to things greatly differing, and sometimes of natures directly opposite. Even Longinus, in his incomparable discourse upon a part of this subject, has comprehended things extremely repugnant to each other, under

> one common name of the *Sublime*. The abuse of the word *Beauty*, has been still more general, and attended with still worse consequences. (1)

Shelley's Medusa is an example of the "horribly beautiful" existing in a state where beauty and horror co-exist, as theories of the sublime are pushed to the limit. In fact, Shelley has succeeded here in finding a type of beauty in horror, and in consideration of this, it can be argued that the beauty of the Medusa is in direct opposition to that found in the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", Shelley's rather Gothic poem of 1816 (Hildebrand 151-52). This contrast is evident in the first stanza of each poem. In the "Hymn":

> The awful shadow of some unseen Power
> Floats though unseen amongst us, — visiting
> This various world with as inconstant wing
> As summer winds that creep from flower to flower. —
> Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,
> It visits with inconstant glance
> Each human heart and countenance. (1-7)

We can contrast "the awful shadow of some unseen Power", purifying, enlightening yet elusive, with the shadowy allure of Medusa's beauty, a manifestation of corruption, contamination, pain and decay. In "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty", an inner transformation, transient yet profound, is brought about by the Spirit of Beauty:

> Spirit of BEAUTY, that doth consecrate
> With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon

Of human thought or form, — where art thou gone?
Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?
(13-17)

This liberating, albeit fleeting, experiencing of the numinous can be contrasted with the dark and terrifyingly permanent petrification of body and soul effected by the horrific beauty of the Gorgon's face. In lines 9-13 of the later poem, Shelley's use of "grace" can be seen as an ironical reference to the malevolent spiritual force of Medusa, as much as to the hideous allure which surrounds her. This reference is doubly ironic in so far as grace, in both its senses, lies at the heart of the "Hymn" — as an expression of that mysterious power which moves the feelings in a manner which is almost as aesthetic as spiritual, as beautiful as sublime: "Like aught that for its grace may be / Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery" (11-12); and also as that quality which gives some hint of an eternal reality behind earthly mutability, a reality which "Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream" (36). Here both uses of the word can be seen to denote the numinous, and the central significance of "grace" in the poem can be gauged from its being the only theological term which is not seen as one of the "poisonous names with which our youth is fed" (53), such as "the name of God and ghosts and Heaven" (27). Yet, in spite of the "Hymn's" elegance and subtle charm, there is no lack of those typical trappings of the Gothic — ghosts, a cave, ruins, pursuing footsteps, the dead — which are listed in the poem's autobiographical fifth stanza. Here, the poet recalls his pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and occult knowledge, which continues until he is visited by the revealing shadow of the divine Intellectual Beauty, the apprehending of which quality is clearly an experiencing of the numinous. The poet recalls

various locations associated with his spiritual quest, places which include the characteristically Gothic ruins and cave. The questing narrator's equivalents in "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci" [2] contrast markedly with Shelley's depiction of himself as a sensitive, intelligent youth, alive to the subtle promptings of Intellectual Beauty, and consist of "a poisonous eft" (25) and "a ghastly bat, bereft / Of sense" (27-28). The first of these creatures emerges, not as the young Shelley might have appeared, from the shadows of the ivy-covered walls of a Gothic ruin, but from behind a stone. It is a sluggish sightseer, and "[p]eeps idly into these Gorgonian eyes" (26), eyes which would turn an even slightly more sensitive soul to stone. The bat, on the other hand, is lured from its cave "like a moth that hies / After a taper" (30-31) by the glare emanating from the writhing, metallic snakes on the Gorgon's head, the light which

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2 In analysing Shelley's poem, I have considered the fragment which Neville Rogers re-discovered in 1961, and which he looked upon as its sixth stanza. For Rogers's discussion of this fragment, see Neville Rogers, "Shelley and the Visual Arts", *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* 12 (1961): 9-17. In supporting his own view that the lines in question should be seen to constitute a sixth and final stanza, and in considering Mary Shelley's omission of them, Rogers states that "[t]he fact that the sixth stanza has nine lines and the other stanzas eight is a typical Shelleyan irregularity by which Mary would not have been disturbed" (Rogers 17). In contrast to this, my view is that the strict abababcc ottava rima rhyme scheme of "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci" must be seen in the light of "Ode to The West Wind", a poem written in a variant of the terza rima stanza form, and one which certainly shows no signs of any "Shelleyan irregularity"; and Rogers's fragment — ababcdcdc — is too obviously unfinished and inconclusive, in both form and content, to be compared in any way to the isolated quatrain which concludes the terza rima stanzas of the first section of *The Triumph of Life*. As far as the aims of my thesis are concerned, this sixth stanza throws no light on "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci", and appears to me to be rather a preliminary sketch for the poem than any attempt at a conclusion. See also Christine Berthin, "Shelley's Prospective Reader", *Shelley 1792-1992*, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universitat Salzburg, 1993) 137-147.

flares at midnight, obscurely sublime, "a light more dread than obscurity" (32). This is the light of spiritual darkness, a manifestation of spiritual and intellectual, as well as visual, obscurity. It is the light of Milton's Hell, the appalling Satanic equivalent of "the awful shadow of some unseen Power".

In spite of the harrowing, compelling subject matter and the strongly Gothic trappings and atmosphere, the sublime aspects of the poem do not convey any sense of drama. The panorama of the Medusa is kept securely within its frame. Even so, the ghastly scene has its own particular power, arising from the magnetic allure of the ambiguous, the harrowing, and the inherently evil. The disquieting vision is presented by means of an irresistibly compelling imagery, and emits its own strange variety of undeniable beauty. The force of the insidious aesthetic appeal of this category of beauty is undeniable, as it is grounded in the inherently fascinating area of the grotesque and bizarre, and in the dangerous attraction of the aestheticised borderlands of sexual pathology, these qualities being manifested powerfully in the absence of any moral or ethical theme, or philosophical ideal. As Murphy points out in *The Dark Angel*:

> [T]he concentrated horror engendered by the Medusa image is designed to attract and engulf us so that our customary resistance to evil fades: we accept completely the implications of pain and destruction because they are mysteriously beautiful and very appealing to dark impulses within us, impulses that thrill to such an image as "A woman's countenance, with serpent locks, / Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks" (39-40). (133-34)

There are striking parallels between "On the Medusa of Leonardo" and *The Cenci,* the most immediately obvious being the belief of Shelley and his contemporaries that the subjects of both poems had been depicted by famous artists of the Italian Renaissance, "On the Medusa of Leonardo" and a portrait which is possibly that of Beatrice Cenci having been wrongly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci and Guido Reni respectively. As Shelley tells Thomas Love Peacock in a letter [3] of July [c. 20] 1819, when sending him a copy of *The Cenci*:

> The translation which I send you is to be prefixed to the play, together with a print of Beatrice — I have a copy of her picture by Guido now in the Colonna Palace at Rome — the most beautiful creature that you can conceive. (103)

Any acquaintance with the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, a representation of youthful innocence and beauty, can only increase the overpowering effect of the horribly beautiful in the play, particularly when we compare her fate to that of Medusa, and the poignant, unspoilt beauty of Beatrice's portrait to our final image of the Gorgon:

> A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,
> Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks. (39-40)

The means of Beatrice's death mirrors that of Medusa. They are both decapitated (Cameron 401). Also, there is a striking analogy in the

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[3] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Shelley's letters are taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols. Ed. Frederick L. Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964. Vol. 2.

factors which bring about their deaths — that of Medusa being made possible by the reflection of her own fatal features in Perseus's shield, and that of Beatrice being brought about primarily through her fatal mode of self-reflection (Hildebrand 155-160).

In his "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci", Shelley has left us with something which an uncharitable critic could reasonably see as an attractively sensational picture of horror and suffering for the connoisseur of such things. Whatever we may finally think of this vision of evil and the horribly beautiful, it is quite clear that it lacks the power and substance of a work which undoubtedly played a crucial role in its inspiration. This is the first part of Goethe's *Faust,* [4] one of those works listed by Peacock as having had the most influence on Shelley. In this extract, which Shelley himself translated, Faust sees what he believes to be his beloved at the witches' sabbath; but the figure is only a seductive illusion. It is, in fact, Medusa, the line of red around her neck betraying the fact that her head has been previously removed. Yet, in spite of this, Faust is affected by an obsessive love for her horrible beauty:

> MEPHISTOPHELES. Let it be — pass on —
>
> No good can come of it — it is not well
>
> To meet it — it is an enchanted phantom,
>
> A lifeless idol; with its numbing look,
>
> It freezes up the blood of man; and they

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4 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Shelley's translation of *Faust - Part One*, and are taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Works of P. B. Shelley*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994.

Who meet its ghastly stare are turned to stone,
Like those who saw Medusa.

FAUST. O, too true!
Her eyes are like the eyes of a fresh corpse
Which no beloved hand has closed. Alas!
That is the breast which Margaret yielded to me —
Those are the lovely limbs which I enjoyed!

MEPHISTOPHELES. It is all magic, poor deluded fool!
She looks to everyone like his first love.

FAUST. O what delight! what woe! I cannot turn
My looks from her sweet piteous countenance.
How strangely does a single blood-red line,
Not broader than the sharp edge of a knife,
Adorn her lovely neck!

MEPHISTOPHELES. Ay, she can carry
Her head under her arm upon occasion;
Perseus has cut it off for her. (535)

It is truth, reality, which saves Prometheus — these qualities being seen as a combination of the inexorable, unmasking force of Necessity with the still deeper truth of self-sacrificing love. To be seduced by illusory appearances is to diminish one's own reality. Qualities of illusion always oppose those of truth, and negative forces bent on corrupting the human spirit will use these qualities to enable their victims to easily identify with the attributes of their evil and negative oppressors,

and to be seduced away from that spiritual reality which lies behind the veil of appearances:

> Horrible forms,
> What and who are ye? Never yet there came
> Phantasms so foul through monster-teeming Hell
> From the all-miscreative brain of Jove;
> Whilst I behold such execrable shapes,
> Methinks I grow like what I contemplate
> And laugh and stare in loathsome sympathy.
>
> (*Prometheus Unbound*, I.445-51)

The intense, rarefied allure of the dead eyes of Goethe's Medusa "freezes up the blood of man; and they / Who meet its ghastly stare are turned to stone"; or in Shelley's phrase from "On the Medusa of Leonardo", Medusa's stare "turns the gazer's spirit into stone" (10). This is the fate of those who succumb to the charms of Shelley's Medusa, and perhaps also to those of the poem itself. This is art for art's sake, with all ideals and values conveniently removed, a stance generally opposed to all Shelley's aspirations and motivations — which no doubt goes a long way towards explaining the uncompleted uniqueness of "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery".

VI. *The West Wind*— Poet as Prophet and Enchanter

It has been suggested in the previous section that the "horrible beauty" of the Medusa can be seen as the obverse of the subject of Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" of 1816, that "Power" which is "unseen", yet brings pure, unalloyed joy and a sense of spiritual liberation, however transitory, to all who experience it. There is a moral quality inherent in the concept of intellectual beauty, a quality inextricably connected to the concept of the human spirit, in whatever realm that spirit may exist, [1] a quality which is inseparable from any sense of the aesthetic or sublime:

> Thus let thy power, which like the truth
> Of nature on my passive youth
> Descended, to my onward life supply
> Its calm — to one who worships thee,
> And every form containing thee,
> Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind
> To fear himself, and love all human kind.
>
> (78-84)

This is the quality which Wasserman describes as "the divinity of perfect

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1 See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley: Vol. I — 1804-1817*, eds. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest (London: Longman, 1989) 523-525, for a discussion of the term "intellectual beauty".

Being, in which man's immortality consists and which constitutes his ideal states of mind" (Wasserman 238-39). However, in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" of 1819, quite a different Power is addressed. This is a power which can inspire drastic social change and moral regeneration, being that aspect of the universal life force which is particularly concerned with all the processes of earthly life, physical, mental and emotional. Yet it is so closely involved in the world of mutability, in the frequently destructive and catastrophic processes of both the human and the natural worlds, that it must be seen as having qualities quite distinct from those associated with the ideal, harmonious realm of intellectual beauty.

It is the ceaselessly active role of the Power, represented by the West Wind, as destroyer and preserver, which differentiates it so strongly from the Power behind intellectual beauty, in which reside essentially non-material visions of spiritual transcendence and individual human perfectibility. Yet just as the poet's initial awareness of intellectual beauty had developed from a sense of the numinous arising from the Gothic sublime —

> While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
> Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
> And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
> Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
>
> (49-52)

— so his deepest communion with the West Wind is brought about through the sense of the numinous arising from dangerously Gothic qualities manifested in the West Wind and in the atmosphere, physical and otherwise, surrounding it (lines 43-51). As Murphy states:

> In a poem like the *Medusa* [. . .] the psychological implications are terrifying because they are so attractive, but the sublime and its potential urge toward annihilation can be converted into affirmative directions, as the *Ode to the West Wind* (1819) will prove. (134)

Nevertheless, the first lines of the poem introduce the West Wind as a Gothic enchanter figure, a terrifying yet invisible agent of mutability, driving before him the withered leaves which represent anonymous multitudes of humanity, dead, dying and diseased. The colours of the leaves — "yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red" — conjure up ghastly, Gothic images of skin yellowed with jaundice and blackened with plague, and showing the pallor of those near death, and the "hectic red" of those stricken with fever.

Shelley's use of leaf imagery to depict multitudes of the doomed is, in the first instance, almost certainly influenced by Virgil's description, in that most Gothic section of the *Aeneid,* Book 6, of the multitudes of the dead who plead with Charon to be ferried across the rivers of Hades:

> To him the whole throng rushed, streaming to the bank, — matrons, and men and great-souled heroes who had lived their lives; boys and maidens unwed, and youths laid on the pyre before their parents' eyes. In legions they came, many as the leaves that fall in the forest at the first chill breath of Autumn [. . .]. (96)

And it can be conjectured with even more probability that Shelley would have been directly influenced by Milton's similar description of the fallen

angels in one of the more Gothic scenes in *Paradise Lost*. In this scene, Satan

> stood and call'd
> His Legions, Angel Forms, who lay intranc't
> Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
> In Vallombrosa, where th'Etrurian shades
> High overarch't embow'r [. . .] . (Bk I, 300-04)

And it is not only in his leaf imagery that Shelley so closely parallels Milton. In *Paradise Lost*, the "Angel Forms", "Thick as Autumnal Leaves", have fled from the unseen presence of God, who can also be seen as an enchanter, as the angels have lain "intranc't", until being awakened by the voice of Satan, "so loud that all the hollow Deep / Of Hell resounded" (Bk I. 314-15).

Shelley also combines the Gothic qualities of Milton and Classical literature in lines 18-23, as he describes the storm clouds generated by the West Wind. Strands of cloud are blown before the approaching storm like the wild locks of Bacchantes or Maenads ("bright hair uplifted from the head", a coiffure also suggestive of that of the terrifying Furies and Medusa), the orgiastic, violent votaries of Dionysus, who exemplify the destructive, instinctive and irrational — which is to say Gothic — aspects of the Classical world. The Maenad imagery identifies the West Wind's role as "destroyer", and also highlights the potentially perilous situation of the poet as he draws increasingly close to the embodiment of destruction. At the end of the "Ode", in lines 63-69, the poet will attempt to become identified completely with the elemental Power of the West Wind, a Power which will disseminate his prophetic writings in a

way which contrasts strongly with the dispersal of the oracular leaves of the archetypically Gothic Sybil of Cumae in Book 3 of *The Aeneid*:

> And when, thither voyaged, thou shalt approach the Cymaean walls, and the mystic lakes, and Avernus, loud with murmuring forests, thou shalt behold the frenzied prophetess, who sings the behests of Fate deep beneath her crag and commits to leaves the written word. And every prophetic verse that the maid inscribes thereon she ranges in due succession and leaves secluded in her cavern. Motionless they hold their station, and quit not their sequence: but when, on turning the hinge, a breath of air has lit upon them, and the swinging door disturbed their light foliage, never more has she care to capture them as they flit through her cavern, nor to restore their ranks, nor to order her songs; but the questioner departs unanswered and curses the Sibyl's shrine. (47)

The poet will assume the Orphic functions of bard and custodian of the oracle, yet lines 18-23 point to the danger inherent in any assumption of the Orphic role, as it stands in relation to the potentially destructive side of the West Wind. Shelley was certainly familiar with the lines from Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton, the supreme Orphic bard of the English canon, implores his Muse, Urania, to:

> drive far off the barbarous dissonance
> Of Bacchus and his Revellers, the Race
> Of that wild Rout that tore the Thracian Bard
> In Rhodope, where Woods and Rocks had Ears
> To rapture, till the savage clamour drown'd

> Both Harp and Voice; nor could the Muse defend
> Her Son. (Bk VII. 32-38)

Orpheus was decapitated and torn to pieces by the revelling Maenads.

As previously stated, the West Wind represents the single Power which brings about all physical and mental vitality. In *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Earl R. Wasserman states that Shelley assumes:

> that the one Power is the moving spirit of all the "energy and wisdom" within existence and governs both human thought and all the operations of nature by a uniform, impartial law of sequences [. . .] . (239)

Yet the essential rightness of this sublime Power does not negate our attitude towards its dual nature, its apparent irrationality and unpredictability, and its frequently castastrophic effect on the human world.

The sublimely stormy "dome of a vast sepulchre" (23-28), dedicated to the dying year and the destructive forces of nature, can also be seen as the earthly obverse of the celestial dome of Lucifer in the first canto of *The Revolt of Islam*: [2]

> We came to a vast hall, whose glorious roof
> Was diamond, which had drunk the lightning's sheen
> In darkness, and now poured it through the woof
> Of spell-inwoven clouds hung there to screen

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2 All quotations are from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Works of P. B. Shelley*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1994.

Its blinding splendour — through such a veil was seen
That work of subtlest power, divine and rare;
Orb above orb, with starry shapes between,
And horned moons, and meteors strange and fair,
On night-black columns poised — one hollow hemisphere!

(Canto 1. Stanza 52)

The West Wind can now be seen as a Luciferic figure. Lucifer is an embodiment of the Morning Star. He is a light-bearer, as Prometheus Pyrophoros is the bearer of fire, and can be seen as the ally of humankind against the authoritarian tyranny of creator gods. Lucifer points the way to an ideal society and a Golden Age, but also tempts us with forbidden, God-like knowledge (Welburn 134). The West Wind offers the poet a direct vision of reality in all its sublime, destructive terror, yet a reality in which those close to the source of Power will be able to transcend the sufferings of the material world. The West Wind exists between life and death, the essence of its Power being the *pneuma*, the wind of the spirit; and the poet, according to how much he partakes of this Power, can partake of the non-material being of the West Wind, which will enable him to experience a vision of a universe beyond good and evil, a perspective of the world which transcends, as it celebrates, the interrelated mutability of all things.

In the poem's fourth section, the poet supplicates the Power he initially invokes. The terrifying Gothic enchanter, the agent of death and disease, is now seen as a companion to the poet, then, finally, their identities seem to merge. When the poet initially submits to the Power of the Luciferic, demonic West Wind, his attitude and demeanour appear to be those more usually associated with a votary of the Christian God, or as one who experiences the numinous Holy Spirit (43-47). In his prose

work, *On Life*, Shelley describes circumstances comparable with the poet's response to the power of the West Wind, doing so in terms which strikingly parallel the words of Jesus in Mark 10.15: "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein" (the chief distinction here being that "the surrounding universe" has taken the place of "the kingdom of God"):

> Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves [. . .] We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who in this respect are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. As men grow up, this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents. (477)

Yet Shelley's relationship with the West Wind is by no means entirely dependent on a passive submission to its will, or to that humble supplication so characteristic of the Christian worshipper, and can be seen as being far closer to that of the worshipper and god of an animistic religion (Webb 1977, 177-78). The Power of the West Wind is actively invoked in lines 42-47 of the "Ode", and then there is a certain presumption in the poet's identification with the Power as he declares, in referring to himself: "A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed /

One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud" (lines 55-56). In the poem's final section, rather than being absorbed into the West Wind, the poet is beginning to have some agency regarding the wind's power, at least to the extent that, in contrast to the poet's former passive submission to the West Wind (42-47), Shelley is now uttering his impassioned requests to be identified with it: "Be thou, Spirit fierce, / My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!" (61-62).

It is now the poet who is the Luciferic Power which organises the functions of the planet, and which directs the mind and feelings of mankind. The light-bearing Lucifer can be seen as a type of the fire-bearing Prometheus — as a liberating, enlightening force, an untrammelled free spirit. Yet the West Wind / Shelley figure can also be seen as an unregenerate Promethean figure, as an ecstatic, Dionysian force. At the beginning of the poem, the West Wind is introduced as a mysterious, sinister agent of change and decay, as a terrifying enchanter driving a doomed humanity before him. At the poem's conclusion, however, Shelley himself has become the enchanter, as he commands the Wind to drive before it his "dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!" (63-64). Like the Sybil's leaves, Shelley's thoughts may be "dead" — remote from the consciousness of the average person, neglected, indecipherable — yet they will at least be driven through the world of mutability to form a nourishing mulch to "quicken a new birth" of the "winged seeds" of his prophecy. The West Wind has now become the poet's agent by means of the incantation of the poem itself. In other words, the enchanter has become the enchanted, and the passive poet has now assumed the god-like identity of the West Wind.

This being so, it should come as no surprise to see how much

Shelley has been influenced by Goethe's *Faust* in the writing of "Ode to the West Wind". Goethe's play is included in Peacock's list of the six literary works which had most influenced Shelley, and the German Gothic masterpiece [3] charts the career of one who, like the Shelley / poet of the "Ode", has given in to Luciferic temptation, presuming to aspire to a level of knowledge beyond the reach of the ordinary mortal. However, where Shelley happily shares the sublime Power of the elemental West Wind, Faust is not able to forge a similarly close relationship with the Spirit of the Earth, which he invokes in the early part of the play. As with Shelley and the West Wind, Faust claims a close kinship with the Spirit, but he is soon rebuffed by the entity:

> SPIRIT. [. . .] Are you that Faust whose challenge smote my ears,
> Who beat his way to me, proclaimed his hour,
> And trembles now in presence of my power,
> Writhes from the breath of it, a frightened worm?
>
> FAUST. And shall I, thing of flame, flinch at the sequel?
> My name is Faust, in everything your equal.
>
> SPIRIT. In flood of life, in action's storm
> I ply on my wave
> With weaving motion
> Birth and the grave,
> A boundless ocean,

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3 All quotations from *Faust* in this chapter are from J. W. von Goethe. *Faust - Part One*. Trans. Philip Wayne. London: Penguin, 1949.

Ceaselessly giving
Weft of living,
Forms unending,
Glowing and blending.
So work I on the whirring loom of time,
The life that clothes the deity sublime.

FAUST. Swift Spirit, you whose projects have no end,
How near akin our natures seem to be!

SPIRIT. You match the spirit that you comprehend,
Not me. (47-48)

The Spirit's song, beginning with "In flood of life", could be a precis of the function of the West Wind.

In Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind", the sublime of the Power of the West Wind communicates a strong sense of the numinous, yet any transcendent quality in the poem as a whole tends to diminish as the work draws towards its conclusion, as the Wind itself represents an immanent, rather than a transcendent, power.

VII. *Adonais* — Flight from the City of Death

Of all Shelley's poetical works, this is the one in which we can apprehend most strongly a presence of the numinous in the poet's increasingly clear depictions of his spiritual ideals. Shelley's use of openly Platonic imagery and terminology in *Adonais,* and his belief in the ultimately spiritual goal of human existence as expressed by the concept of the One, [1] need not be seen to be in conflict with his philosophical scepticism, which questioned equally a materialistic and a spiritual view of life (Spence 144-48). As Pulos states: "[L]ike every sceptic before him, Shelley cultivated a sceptical solution to doubt, even to the extent of expressing various degrees of assent to propositions regarding ultimate reality" (Pulos 106-07). In his *Power and Self-Consciousness in the Poetry of Shelley,* Andrew J. Welburn sees the poet's situation from a somewhat different perspective. Referring to the concluding stanzas of *Adonais,* which tell of "That Light whose smile kindles the Universe [. . .] that sustaining Love [. . .] Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality" (lines 478-86) Welburn says that Shelley

> undergoes a transformation of awareness which has little to do with argument and speculation, which come to an end here. The poet offers no "conclusion" but, in full awareness of the

[1] Although in Neoplatonism the One is beyond being, Plotinus explains that: "It is because there is nothing in it that all things come from it: in order that being may exist, the One is not being, but the generator of being" See Cristina D'Ancona Costa, "Plotinus and later Platonic philosophers on the causality of the First Principle", *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 370.

> possibilities, without the reassurance of a committed faith but likewise free from suicidal despair, in mingled fear and hope, dares to contemplate in imagination the world beyond the painted veil. In full consciousness he trusts himself to face the fact of death and not be destroyed as a human being. (24)

In reading *Adonais*, our experiencing of what can best be described as the pure, liberating light of eternal reality has, in any event, grown out of a long meditation on corruption, decay and mutability. The Arcadian, pastoral formalities of the first part of the poem are manipulated by, and infused with, subtle yet powerful qualities of the Gothic, which engender those various species of the sublime, the experiencing of which is such a necessary prelude to the numinous revelation awaiting us in the poem's final section. This also, in its transcendent luminosity, contrasts most effectively with the dark, brooding, deathly atmosphere which manifests itself consistently throughout the preceding stanzas.

Unlike the poem's Hellenistic models, *Lament for Adonis* and *Lament for Bion* — both elegies, written by Bion and possibly Moschus respectively — Shelley's poem makes important use of the imagery and atmosphere of that most Gothic of locations — the graveyard — and specifically of those of the Protestant Cemetery at Rome, where Keats was buried, as also was Shelley's son, William. In Shelley's time, the Protestant Cemetery was situated just outside the old city walls, in the corner of a neglected patch of wasteland dotted with overgrown Roman ruins, its location ensuring that the Holy City remained uncontaminated by the unsanctified remains of heretics. The place had a special significance for Shelley as his son's final resting place, and even before William's death it must have made a powerful impression on him, as can

be seen in the following extract from his letter to Peacock, dated 17 or 18 December, 1818:

> The English bur[y]ing place is a green slope near the walls, under the pyramidal tomb of Cestius, & is I think the most beautiful & solemn cemetery I ever beheld. To see the sun shining on its bright grass fresh when we visited it with the autumnal dews, & hear the whispering of the wind among the leaves of the trees which have overgrown the tomb of Cestius, & the coil which is stirring in the sunwarm earth & to mark the tombs mostly of women & young people who were buried there, one might, if one were to die, desire the sleep they seem to sleep. (59-60)

Yet in *Adonais*, Shelley has given the cemetery an overpoweringly Gothic feeling, in spite of its Roman location and the Classical Greek entities with which he peoples it. This is particularly so in those parts of the poem dealing more specifically with the corpse of the dead Keats, such as in lines 64-72.

Shelley makes it clear quite early on in *Adonais*, in Stanza 7, lines 55-58, that his elegy on John Keats is set not only in a graveyard, but in a city of the dead. The Eternal City has become a necropolis. As Alan M. Weinberg points out in *Shelley's Italian Experience*, Rome's Classical heritage of statuary and architectural ruins is seen by the poet primarily as a monument to the dead who are buried there, the whole city becoming an extension of the Protestant Cemetery:

> Death, a majestic figure, appropriates Rome's supremacy for himself, making Rome the scene of Death's triumph and the

> graveside of the world. The reference to "beauty and decay" on the other hand, implies a duality in the depiction of Rome. It is a city of death in both a negative and a positive sense. While relentlessly destroying the tangible remains of life and civilisation, Death bestows fame upon man's achievement. Rome is a fitting place for Keats's burial. (175-176)

In the letter of Shelley to Peacock quoted previously, the poet writes that:

> Rome is a city as it were of the dead, or rather of those who cannot die, & who survive the puny generations which inhabit & pass over the spot which they have made sacred to eternity. (59)

The "kingly Death" in line 55 of *Adonais* evokes the sombre majesty of Petrarch's *Triumph of Death*, [2] with its vision of the countless multitudes of the dead, in spite of the Italian poet's personification of death as a female. In Stanza 21 of *Adonais* (lines 181-89), we have a very brief, yet telling, statement on the omnipotence and egalitarian universality of death, and of the rapidity with which it can change our role in the tragedy which is life. Shelley still stresses the transience of the individual human life, of which the only real memorial is grief, itself not lasting, being as mortal as the loved one. However, the cycle of Nature is no longer celebrated, or even accepted with the slightest degree of philosophical positivity. The stanza's last three lines

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2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from F. Petrarch. *The Triumphs of Petrarch*. Trans. Ernest Hatch Wilkins. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962.

show us that human life is now seen as an unending round of suffering and grief, mocked by the fresh and gaudy face of Nature. Yet in spite of the above, lines 184-186 do convey more than a faint echo of Petrarch's poem — from which the following lines are taken — and bring something of its associated Platonic breadth of vision to the stanza's otherwise sorrowful hopelessness:

> [A]nd then suddenly
> The vale was filled with folk already dead,
> Beyond the power of prose or verse to tell.
> The plain itself and all its slopes were filled
> With a great host of the dead of many times,
> From India, Cathay, Morocco, Spain.
> Here now were they who were called fortunate,
> Popes, emperors, and others who had ruled;
> Now are they naked, poor, of all bereft.
> Where now their riches? Where their honours now?
> Where now their gems and sceptres, and their crowns,
> Their mitres, and the purple they had worn? (56)

The Platonic message of Petrarch's poem is conveyed, in part, by what perhaps can best be described as a Gothic atmosphere of universal death, an atmosphere realised and embellished, if not fleshed out, over the next 200 years by artists who were inspired by his poem, and whose works feature animated, ambulant skeletons and open tombs.[3] It is,

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3 See F. Petrarch, *Lord Morley's Tryumphes of Fraunces Petrarcke*, trans. Lord Morley, ed. D. D. Carnicelli (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) 38-46.

however, also quite understandable that artists of that time should stress the macabre nature of a poem whose dedicatee, Laura, had died of the plague in 1348, during the Black Death, when up to half the population of Europe perished within the space of 18 months. Even the slightest echo of Petrarch's work lends to Shelley's melancholy stanza the possibility, however remote, of some apprehension of the sublime Power of death, with perhaps some associated awareness of the numinous; but just as importantly, the presence of Petrarch at this low point in the poem points the way forward to the final Platonic revelation of *Adonais*. It is fitting that we should find the spirit of Petrarch in such a sorrowful and world-weary stanza. The *Triumph of Eternity* interprets Laura's death in terms of Plato's idea of a perfect Eternity versus the fleeting procession of shadows which we experience as our life on Earth. As Weinberg quotes Newman Ivey White as saying:

> Eternity in these *Triumphs* was the one lasting perfection; earthly life, in the light of Eternity, was a procession of shadows [. . .] Throughout the poem [*Adonais*] Shelley's notion of Life and Death is impressively similar to that found in Petrarch's *Triumphs*. In the concluding lines of the *Triumph of Death*, Part II, Petrarch states that Death is called so only by the unwise, and that Laura, dead, is really alive, whereas her living lover is in truth dead. (193-94)

The lines referred to are as follows:

> "How could I fail to know my heavenly guide?"
> I answered, like to one who speaks and weeps,
> "Tell me, I pray, art thou in life or death?"

> "I am in life, and thou art still in death",
> She said, "as thou wilt be until there come
> The hour that shall release thee from the earth". (61)

Yet in spite of his irresistible Power, and the terrifying obscurity surrounding him, Death is not the Gothic villain of *Adonais*. This role is reserved for the critics who Shelley believed, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, hounded John Keats to his death. Shelley seems, understandably enough, to have associated the *Quarterly Review* critics with the obscure and terrifyingly sublime Death of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Milton's epic, Death wields "a dreadful Dart"; in the Preface to *Adonais*, the critics inflict their deadly wounds by means of a "poisoned shaft" (391); and in the second stanza of the poem itself, the obscurity of Milton's Death and the venom of the critics are combined in "the shaft which flies / In darkness" (lines 11-12).

The *Quarterly* critics targeted Keats for motives as much social and political as literary (Roe 1-26). Although he did not share Shelley's revolutionary social ideals, he was a religious sceptic and an anti-war radical liberal who believed in freedom of speech (Cameron 422). Keats's detractors alluded sneeringly to his lowly social origins and lack of a Classical education, and the general aim of the *Quarterly* article seems to have been to slander and discredit him with a view to completely sabotaging his literary career (De Montluzin 102-05):

> He is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called "Cockney Poetry", which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language. Of this school Mr Leigh Hunt [. . .] aspires to be the hierophant [. . .] This author is a copyist of Mr Hunt,

> but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd, than his prototype. (Cameron 425-26)

Shelley identifies himself so closely with Keats that in writing about the persecution of the younger poet, whether in *Adonais* or in prose writings, it is often impossible to identify the victim of the particular persecution. In discarded drafts of the Preface to the poem, Shelley emphasises his own sufferings:

> Persecution, contumely and calumny have been heaped upon me in profuse measure [. . .] domestic conspiracy and legal oppression have violated in my person the most sacred rights of nature and humanity. (Cameron 427)

In Stanza 4 of *Adonais* (lines 28-36), the earlier victim of the Establishment to whom Keats is compared is Milton, who was mocked and persecuted at the time of the Restoration of King Charles II. Having published statements (albeit after the fact) which justified the execution of Charles I, the father of the restored monarch, Milton himself was lucky not to have been subjected to a "loathed rite . . . of blood" at the time of the new king's Coronation festivities in London, when many of the regicides were hanged, drawn and quartered in a public ritual of retribution. Decapitated and dismembered, suffering a fate comparable to that of Orpheus at the hands of the Maenads, their fate was widely and graphically advertised, and their heads and body parts were prominently displayed around the City. Here, the apparently joyous, festive London of the Merry Monarch presents us with yet another aspect of the City of

Death, from which place Milton takes flight. Stanza 4 of *Adonais* refers to the following lines from Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*:

> Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole,
> More safe I Sing with mortal voice, unchang'd
> To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
> On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues;
> In darkness, and with dangers compast round,
> And solitude. (23-28)

These lines lead into the passage which was quoted in the previous chapter in relation to the second sonnet of *Ode to the West Wind*, that section of his epic in which Milton begs Urania to

> drive far off the barbarous dissonance
> Of Bacchus and his Revellers, the Race
> Of that wild Rout that tore the Thracian Bard
> In Rhodope, where Woods and Rocks had Ears
> To rapture, till the savage clamour drown'd
> Both Harp and Voice. (Bk. VII. 32-37)

The Classically Gothic Maenads, consumed with sexual impulses, and vengefully lusting for the blood of Orpheus, symbolise the Cavaliers of the Restoration, with their violent and dissolute characteristics. These Cavaliers are analogous to the critics of the *Quarterly Review*, and their Establishment masters, such as the Poet Laureate Southey, who was on the *Quarterly's* editorial board. Shelley not only believed that Keats had been destroyed by the *Quarterly* reviewers and their masters, but that he himself had been hounded and persecuted by them also (Cameron 422-

31). Like these enemies of Keats and Shelley, the cruel and dissolute Restoration Royalists are representatives of the entrenched privilege, self-serving power and all-pervading influence of a ruling class intent on dominating and debasing culture as it uses it in the pursuit of its own materialistic purposes. One category of the loathed rites of lust, as opposed to those of blood, is surely intended by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* to be seen as the suggestive, sniggering Restoration comedy, which he detested as a pollutant of one of the well-springs of Western culture, the dramatic tradition founded on the tragedies of the ancient Greeks:

> The drama being that form under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible of being combined than any other, the connexion of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form: and it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life. (491-92)

Finally, in the next extract from *A Defence of Poetry*, a self-exiled and much-maligned Shelley attacks, as he does in *Adonais*, the sublime and seemingly irresistible power of a corrupt and tyrannical Establishment cast as the Gothic Villain, from whom all flight is ineffectual, a seemingly omniscient elite which combines political and religious oppression with a cynical debasement of the cultural heart of society:

> The period in our own history of the grossest degradation of the drama is the reign of Charles II when all forms in which poetry had been accustomed to be expressed became hymns to the triumph of kingly power over liberty and virtue. Milton stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him [. . .] malignity, sarcasm and contempt, succeed to sympathetic merriment; we hardly laugh, but we smile. Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty in life, becomes, from the very veil which it assumes, more active if less disgusting: it is a monster for which the corruption of society for ever brings forth new food, which it devours in secret.
>
> (491)

Yet in Stanza 24 of *Adonais,* Shelley shows us that Urania, the Muse of both Milton and Keats, is ultimately proof against the destructive natures of those who wield worldly power and influence and, in spite of suffering pain and injury at their hands, is able to continue to bring eternal beauty to an undeserving world. In the extremely Gothic Stanza 28, Shelley shows how Keats's enemies, "[t]he herded wolves, bold only to pursue; / The obscene ravens, clamorous o'er the dead" (244-45), are themselves humiliated by Byron — as Apollo — who successfully defeats the critics in his *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,* just as Apollo destroyed the Python. [4] Being himself an influential member of the Establishment — in fact if not in sentiment — as well as a highly successful poet, no doubt assisted Byron greatly in his victory over the critics of Keats: "The spoilers tempt no second blow, / They fawn on the proud feet that spurn them lying low" (251-52).

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4 See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose,* eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977) 399n.

VIII. *Adonais* — The Hunter Hunted

In his very brief section on *Adonais,* Murphy makes the following comment: "In *Adonais* (1821), a masterful use of the Wandering Jew figure and the quest-curse convention develops one of the poem's central themes" (Murphy 142). The characteristically Gothic quest-curse convention is that process in which an apparently noble and self-sacrificing search for individual enlightenment and universal truth results in the downfall, if not damnation, of the seeker. However heroic the quest may appear to be, the selfishness, presumption or arrogance of the seeker ensures it will lead to his ultimate doom (Murphy 101-03). As well as dictating the underlying theme of Mary Shelley's Gothic masterpiece, *Frankenstein,* the quest-curse convention develops that of Goethe's *Faust,* that seminal work in Shelley's early reading; and we have already seen it as directing the course of *Wieland,* his favourite novel. Death in itself can also be an objective in the quest-curse convention, as is seen in Byron's *Manfred.* In *Adonais,* one of "the poem's central themes" referred to by Murphy is the idea, inseparable from the quest-curse convention, that one can be simultaneously one's own tyrant and victim. It is addressed specifically in Stanza 31, but the three stanzas following this must also be seen as crucial to any consideration of it. Although these stanzas have been criticised as vehicles of Shelley's supposedly weak and effete self-portraits, Stanza 31 (lines 271-79) demonstrates that their underlying imagery is of savage, energetic hunting and terrified flight. Murphy supports his argument by stating that Stanza 31

> functions admirably in support of the poem's major theme that the "companionless" creative imagination wanders about feebly and hunted by the tyranny of the external world or by the haunting quality of the imagination's ideal vision, "Nature's naked loveliness". (142-43)

Shelley compares himself to Actaeon the hunter, who was changed into a stag by Artemis, and hunted to death by her as punishment for secretly watching her and her nymphs as they bathed, Artemis here symbolising "Nature's naked loveliness". Actaeon cannot be described as a frail form, and neither can Orpheus nor Milton, who, even in his most beleaguered days could not have been considered "a phantom among men; companionless". Yet the latter phrase can be justifiably applied to the Wandering Jew, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter. In Murphy's largely undeveloped analysis, we ourselves are able to include, conveniently and credibly, the victims of Artemis, as well as those of hysterical Maenads, vicious Cavaliers, and heartless *Quarterly* critics.

Yet another figure essential to an understanding of these stanzas is Dionysus, or Bacchus. The pard — that is, the leopard or panther — was sacred to Bacchus, and Shelley refers to himself at the beginning of Stanza 32 as: "A pardlike Spirit beautiful and swift". This is quite probably a conscious reference to the first lines of the fourth stanza of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale", [1] with which Shelley was familiar:

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[1] Shelley alludes to this poem in the first two lines of Stanza 17, when he speaks of: "Thy sister's spirit, the lorn nightingale". See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977) 396n. The extract from Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" is taken from John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1988) 347.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy. (31-33)

In Stanza 33, lines 289-92, the poet identifies himself more closely with Dionysus. This arises from that god's association with the story of Actaeon, and also from the ambiguous part the deity plays in the Orphic tradition. In Euripides' *The Bacchae* [2] and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the end of Pentheus is shown as closely parallelling that of Actaeon. Just as the doomed hunter met his death as a result of spying on the fierce Artemis and her maidens, so the Theban king, wishing to destroy the Maenads' Dionysian cult, spies on them as they prepare to carry out their rituals in the forest, and is similarly observed and killed. His fate is related in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in the writer's concise narrative of Euripides' play:

[T]he first to see him, first
To rush in frenzy, first to hurl her staff,
Her Bacchic staff, and wound her Pentheus was
His mother. "Here!" she called her sisters, "Here!
That giant boar that prowls about our fields,
I'm going to kill that boar!" The whole mad throng
Rush at him, all united, and pursue
Their frightened quarry [. . .]
Wounded, he cries, "Help, Aunt Autonoe!

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2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Euripides. *The Plays of Euripides: Vol. I — Hippolytus, Trojan Women, Bacchae.* Trans. Gilbert Murray. London: George Allen and Sons, 1911.

Mercy! Actaeon's ghost should move your mercy!"

(Bk.III. 715-22, 725-26)

Euripides' own description of the death of Pentheus at the hands of the Bacchae is one of the more hideously Gothic passages in Classical Greek literature; and quite appropriately so, as the worship of Dionysus, or Bacchus, lies at the wild, irrational heart of the Classical world:

> But she [Agave, Pentheus' mother], with lips a-foam and eyes that run
> Like leaping fire, with thoughts that ne'er should be
> On earth, possessed by Bacchios utterly,
> Stays not nor hears. Round his left arm she put
> Both hands, set hard against his side her foot,
> Drew . . . and the shoulder severed! — Not by might
> Of arm, but easily, as the God made light
> Her hand's essay. And at the other side
> Was Ino rending; and the torn flesh cried,
> And on Autonoe pressed, and all the crowd
> Of ravening arms. (65-66)

To reinforce the parallel between the stories of Acteon and Pentheus, the above-mentioned Autonoe is the mother of Actaeon and, as Euripides shows in *The Bacchae*, the site of Pentheus' death is also that of Actaeon's:

CADMUS. 'Twas thou. — Thou and thy sisters wrought his death.

AGAVE. In what place was it? His own house, or where?

CADMUS. Where the dogs tore Actaeon, even there. (76)

So as well as depicting himself as a "frail Form, / A phantom among men" fleeing from his own thoughts which pursue him "like raging hounds", Shelley also presents himself as "a pardlike Spirit", a follower of Dionysus, if not the god himself. This contradiction is shown even more clearly in Stanza 33, as mentioned above, in which Shelley is seen as carrying the thyrsus. [3] This was the light staff carried by devotees of Dionysus — the Maenads or Bacchae — tipped with a bunch of ivy or grape leaves, frequently with the addition of an evergreen cone. Sometimes the thyrsus had a sharp spike embedded in its upper part (Rossetti 136). This is the staff wielded by "the Race / Of that wild Rout that tore the Thracian Bard / In Rhodope", those violent, riotous, lustful symbols of the Cavaliers who persecuted Milton; and Ovid shows it as the implement with which Agave first wounds Pentheus: "[F]irst to hurl her staff, / Her Bacchic staff, and wound her Pentheus was / His mother", whilst in *The Bacchae*, we see Agave brandishing her son's head, impaled on her thyrsus:

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3 Shelley's description of himself as Dionysus is in all likelihood based on the following description in his own copy of Lemprière (see P. B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols., ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) vol 1. 437). See J. Lemprière, *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary* (Revised and rewritten 1949) ed. F. A. Wright (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1879) 100 for the following description of Bacchus (Dionysus): "As he was the god of vintage, of wine, and of drinkers, he is generally represented crowned with vine and ivy leaves, with a thyrsus in his hand. His figure is that of an effeminate young man, to denote the joys which commonly prevail at feasts [. . .] The panther is sacred to him, because he went in his expedition covered with the skin of that beast".

And, ah, the head! Of all the rest,
His mother hath it, pierced upon a wand,
As one might pierce a lion's, and through the land,
Leaving her sisters in their dancing place,
Bears it on high! (66)

Yet the thyrsus was as much associated with poets as with Bacchantes, and ivy was the emblem of the poet (Rossetti 136). Shelley's stressful dilemma, caused by the disturbing dichotomy of his role, is powerfully conveyed in the second part of Stanza 33. His thyrsus is "dripping with the forest's noonday dew", rather than with the blood of Pentheus, yet the inner conflict engendered by any attempts to control the violent energy inherent in his Dionysian role causes the staff to vibrate wildly, "as the everbeating heart / Shook the weak hand that grasped it". Finally, he clearly pictures himself, "Actaeon-like", as one of the wild creatures so enthusiastically hunted down and eaten alive by the Maenads: "A herd-abandoned deer struck by the hunter's dart". He is indeed, as Murphy states, "his own tyrant and victim simultaneously" (Murphy 142). Shelley is not only the persecuted Milton / Orpheus figure. He is now also identified, however reluctantly, with Dionysus, the driving force behind the terrifying, uncontrollably violent Maenads who killed and dismembered Orpheus, the patron of music and poetry.

There are venerable antecedents for the apparently contradictory aspects of Shelley's self-representation as poet-Bacchante, Dionysus-Orpheus, hunter-hunted. As I have demonstrated in a previous chapter, the symmetry and harmonious balance of ancient Greece were inspired and directed by the irrational trance-messages of such seers as the prophetess of Apollo at Delphi. As the son of Apollo, Orpheus was understandably associated with his father, whose worship superseded

that of Dionysus at Delphi. However, the oracle of Delphi remained instrumental in the spreading of the Dionysian cult. The following extract from *Orpheus and Greek Religion* by W. K. C. Guthrie is a likely historical explanation for the disturbingly puzzling similarities between Orpheus and Dionysus:

> What were the original religious connections of Orpheus in prehistoric Thrace, it may well be thought impossible to decide. Most probable is the theory which makes him a figure of the Apolline religion, priest or in some other way satellite of the god. Later he, or those who followed or believed in him, embraced the established cult of Thrace, that of Dionysus. In doing so they modified and civilised it considerably by the addition of some Apolline features and some which were original and can only be called Orphic. (44)

As far as any mythological identification of Orpheus with Dionysus is concerned, Guthrie states that "Orpheus was not regarded as a god, but as a hero", and although the central figure of a cult, was "probably never, certainly scarcely ever worshipped as a god" (Guthrie 41). Yet although there is only one surviving "legend which shows a striking parallel between the two", Guthrie demonstrates that it is, nevertheless, an extremely significant narrative in so far as it relates

> the story that Orpheus was killed by being torn in pieces just as Dionysus was said to have been torn by the Titans and as his symbol [such as a living child or animal] was torn by his worshippers during the orgies of his religion, and this was connected in the minds of the Greeks with the idea of bitter

> enmity between the two; for tradition said that the dismemberment of Orpheus was executed at the commands of Dionysus. (42)

The above examples, drawn from the irrational, Gothic side of Classical culture, demonstrate the complexity and power of Shelley's manipulation of the concept of the hunter hunted; but towards the end of those stanzas most closely associated with this theme, we encounter lines (Stanza 34, lines 302-06) which lead us by a circuitous route to the most terrifyingly sublime example of the tyrant as his own victim, only this time by way of the Medieval legends of northern Europe, and the late 18th century Gothic literature of Britain and Germany. Lines very similar to 302-06 are scattered throughout *The Wandering Jew,* [4] an early work of Shelley's written between 1 September 1809 and 5 March 1810. The following are those closest to the phrases and images in Stanza 34:

> He raised his passion-quivering hand,
> He loosed the grey encircling band,
> A burning cross was there;
> Its colour was like to recent blood,
> Deep marked upon his brow it stood,
> And spread a lambent glare. (816-21)

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4 All quotations from *The Wandering Jew* are from Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Poems of Shelley: Vol I — 1804-1817.* Eds. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest. London: Longman, 1989. Although Murphy, in 78n of his *Dark Angel* (pub. 1975) considers Shelley to have written this poem in collaboration with Medwin, it is made clear on pp.38-41 of the above-mentioned Matthews and Everest edition of the poet's works that *The Wandering Jew* can be attributed solely to Shelley.

Even in considering only the most obvious allusions, the similarities between the above extract and *Adonais*, Stanza 34, lines 302-06, are striking. In *Adonais*, Stanza 34, the Stranger bares his brow "with a sudden hand", while in *The Wandering Jew*, his hand is "passion-quivering" (reminiscent of the vibrating, trembling, "weak hand" of *Adonais*, Stanza 33, line 295). In *Adonais*, the subject reveals "his branded and ensanguined brow" (line 305); in the earlier poem, the Wandering Jew is shown with a supernaturally luminous brand "[d]eep marked upon his brow", and although not actually "ensanguined", "[i]ts colour was like to recent blood". Although he is branded like Cain (in *Genesis* IV.15, God merely "set a mark upon Cain"), the Jew's mark is in the form of a burning cross, the imagery of which is echoed in *Adonais's* association of Shelley with both Cain and Christ: "his branded and ensanguined brow, / Which was like Cain's or Christ's" (305-06). Various explanations have been put forward to explain these sometimes offending lines, the most credible by Rossetti in his *Shelley — Adonais*. He surmises that Shelley represents "his own brow as being branded like Cain's — stamped with the mark of reprobation; and ensanguined like Christ's — bleeding from a crown of thorns". Rossetti considers these similes to indicate that Shelley saw himself as a social outcast, particularly as he had, as a person of suspect morality, been deprived by law of his children by his first marriage. Rossetti continues: "The close coupling together, in this line, of the names of Cain and Christ, was not likely to conciliate antagonists; and indeed one may safely surmise that it was done by Shelley more for the wanton purpose of exasperating them than with any other object" (Rossetti 137-38). Although this biographical interpretation *cannot* be reasonably argued against, Rossetti's limited perception of Shelley's restriction of non-Classical allusions in *Adonais* to Christ, Cain, Milton, Chatterton, Sydney, and the

name Albion, prevents him from looking further afield into the worlds of Medieval legend and Gothic Romanticism, which exert equally strong, if far less overt, influences on Shelley's poem. It will become increasingly clear that an indirect, yet far from tenuous, link between Cain and Christ can be derived from the passage in Shelley's *The Wandering Jew* quoted earlier in this chapter, and from its sources; as well as from traditional associations of Cain and the Wandering Jew, and from the relationship between the Wandering Jew and the bleeding, suffering Christ on his way to Calvary; and in the face of any theory, it can be safely assumed that the Wandering Jew's brand has a shape which denotes that the terrible sin he committed is inextricably linked to Christ's crucifixion. According to the 13th century English chronicler, Roger of Wendover:

> When therefore the Jews were dragging Jesus forth, and had reached the door, Cartaphilus, a porter of the hall in Pilate's service, as Jesus was going out of the door, impiously struck Him on the back with his hand, and said in mockery: "Go quicker, Jesus, go quicker; why do you loiter?" And Jesus looking back on him with a severe countenance said to him, "I am going, and you will wait till I return".
>
> (Anderson, G. K., *The Legend of the Wandering Jew,* 19)

However, in spite of the Medieval origins of the various legends of the Wandering Jew, the direct inspiration for those lines from Shelley's poem of the same name, which were quoted earlier in this chapter, comes yet again from one of Shelley's favourite Gothic novels — *The Monk*, by Matthew Gregory Lewis. These lines derive directly from a scene in this novel in which a mysterious Stranger — a designation prominently

featured in the above extract from Stanza 34 of *Adonais* — is attempting to exorcise the spectral Bleeding Nun:

> He spoke in a commanding tone, and drew the sable band from his fore-head. In spite of his injunctions to the contrary, Curiosity would not suffer me to keep my eyes off his face: I raised them, and beheld a burning Cross impressed upon his brow. For the horror with which this object inspired me I cannot account, but I never felt its equal! My senses left me for some moments; A mysterious dread overcame my courage, and had not the Exorciser caught my hand, I should have fallen out of the Circle. (271)

In the above extract, the Stranger "drew the sable band from his fore-head", whilst in Shelley's early poem, the Wandering Jew "loosed the grey encircling band". In *The Monk,* the narrator states that he then "beheld a burning Cross impressed upon his brow", and in *The Wandering Jew*, "A burning cross was there; / Its colour was like to recent blood, / Deep marked upon his brow it stood" (818-820). The Stranger in *The Monk* is never referred to as the Wandering Jew, but Lewis, nevertheless, gives us an accurate portrait of that doomed traveller, insofar as it is taken from ideas about the Wandering Jew current throughout Europe at the height of the Romantic period:

> What Lewis has given us deserves much attention, because it is, all things considered, the most complete portrait of the Wandering Jew drawn during the reign of Gothic romanticism. There are two features of this portrait which emerge at once. One is the now familiar piercing glance of the Jew, whose eyes

> are "large, black, and sparkling". The other is the flaming cross stamped on his forehead, which, in this instance, he hides from ordinary mankind by a band of black velvet. This Mark of the Wandering Jew is new to us. It is clearly analogous to the mark which the Lord placed upon Cain. I do not think we can credit its origin to Monk Lewis. He certainly made it famous, but this detail of contamination with the Legend of Cain may be much older than *The Monk.* (Anderson 179)

Although we may not give Lewis credit for the Mark of the Wandering Jew, he can still be seen as playing an essential part in the creation of *Adonais,* and in the development of the powerful and mysterious imagery in Stanza 34 of that poem. We will also come to see him as having a foundational influence on ideas surrounding the quest-curse convention in Shelley's poem, and as being instrumental in the production of a work which not only presented to the young Shelley the tyrant as victim theme in its most extreme form, but which also linked this idea inextricably to the Legend of the Wandering Jew.

In the children's library at Field Place, Shelley's childhood home, was a book — Lewis's *Tales of Wonder*[5] — which was of overwhelming significance in the setting of Shelley's future literary

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5 See Louis F. Peck, *A Life of Matthew G. Lewis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961) 132-133: "Four separate works have at various times been confounded — Scott's *An Apology for Tales of Terror* (1799), Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* (1801), the anonymous *Tales of Terror; with an Introductory Dialogue* (1801), and Henry Morley's *Tales of Terror and Wonder Collected by Matthew Gregory Lewis* [1887]; when the tangle was unravelled in 1894, the error of attributing *Tales of Terror* to Lewis had already found its way into standard bibliographies and literary histories and persists today".

direction, and which can be seen as having a crucial influence on so much of the thematic material in *Adonais* (Holmes 3). This volume, amongst the earliest material to expose the young poet's mind to the influence of the Gothic (and incorrectly identified by Holmes in *The Pursuit* as *Tales of Terror*), is a collection of Gothic ballads and stories in verse, by Lewis himself and other writers, and first appeared late in 1800 or early in 1801 (Peck 124). The poem in *Tales of Wonder* which provides the key to so much of the allusive material in Stanzas 31 to 34, and which is such a potent original of the underlying themes of *Adonais* — those of flight and of the tyrant as victim — is "The Wild Huntsman" [6] — a translation by Sir Walter Scott of the "Wilde Jäger" of the German poet, Gottfried August Bürger.

The version by Scott — with whose poetry and prose Shelley was well acquainted, [7] and whose poetical style had influenced the younger poet from early youth — is a fine poem in its own right (Holmes 181). (Also, in light of the following, it is perhaps significant that Scott's influence is particularly evident in Shelley's *The Wandering Jew* (Shelley, eds. Matthews and Everest 40)) "The Wild Huntsman" was first published in 1796 as "The Chase", together with "William and Helen", another of Scott's translations of Bürger. Shelley would undoubtedly have read this graphically Gothic poem at an early and impressionable age, in his treasured volume of Lewis' *Tales of Wonder*, in the children's library at Field Place. The poem's narrative tells of a Wildgrave, or

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6 Quotations from "The Wild Huntsman" are taken from Sir Walter Scott. *The Works of Sir Walter Scott.* Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1995.

7 See *Journals* vol 2, 671-72)

Keeper of the Royal Forest, who delights in hunting across the fields and gardens of powerless peasants, destroying their crops, and killing and mutilating their livestock. One Sabbath day, as he irreverently hunts the stag and carries out his associated depredations, his hunting party is unaccountably joined by two Strangers: one rides at the Wildgrave's left side, on a black horse, while the other Stranger, to his right, is mounted on a white steed. These mysterious riders can be clearly seen as good and bad angels, the left-hand Stranger successfully encouraging the Wildgrave to carry out evil, while the one on the right pleads with him to spare his victims, but to no avail. Finally, the hunting party chases its quarry to the door of a hermit's hut, in which sacred dwelling the stag has taken refuge (and apart from any of the poem's above-mentioned influences on Shelley, it is in these following lines, and in others in the work expressing similar sentiments, that we can also see how "The Wild Huntsman" would have been important in sowing the seeds of Shelley's life-long pursuit of social and political justice):

> The meanest brute has rights to plead,
> Which, wrong'd by cruelty, or pride,
> Draw vengeance on the ruthless head: —
> Be warn'd at length, and turn aside. (429)

The Wildgrave is about to ride down the hermit, when he finds himself alone in the forest. Hermit, hut, stag, hounds, horses, and Strangers have all miraculously disappeared. He stands astounded and terrified for a while, then hears his doom pronounced by a thunderous voice:

> Be chased for ever through the wood;

For ever roam the affrighted wild;
And let thy fate instruct the proud,
God's meanest creature is his child. (430)

It is impossible to conceive of a more sudden and dramatic transformation of tyrant into victim than that shown in Scott's poem. A doom similar to that of Cain and the Wandering Jew is laid upon him: "For ever roam the affrighted wild; / And let thy fate instruct the proud". The injunction to: "Be chased for ever through the wood" bears more than a passing resemblance to the fate of Actaeon, in spite of the fact that the Classical victim was not "chased for ever", nor does it appear that the Wildgrave is hunted by his own hounds, as was Actaeon. However, these differences in no way detract from the relevance of the poem's presentation of the tyrant as victim in such a way that it can be seen as a seminal work in the conception of *Adonais;* and although the fate of the Wildgrave is certainly not a description of the results of any quest-curse process related specifically to him, crucial aspects of the curse-quest convention are, nevertheless, powerfully presented in Scott's poem. The utter presumption and arrogance of the Wildgrave, and his defiance of God and rejection of ordinary humanity, is an even more extreme version of the attitudes of Byron's Cain and Manfred, Shelley's Alastor, and Goethe's Faust. The following extremely Gothic stanzas are a terrifyingly sublime depiction of the punishment of the Wildgrave whose fate, even though not having arisen through any of the presumptuous idealism associated with the quest-curse convention, is more than sufficiently Actaeon-like to allow it to be seen as an essential original of *Adonais*:

From yawning rifts, with many a yell,

> Mix'd with sulphureous flames, ascend
> The misbegotten dogs of hell.
>
> What ghastly Huntsman next arose,
> Well may I guess, but dare not tell;
> His eye like midnight lightning glows,
> His steed the swarthy hue of hell.
>
> The Wildgrave flies o'er bush and thorn,
> With many a shriek of helpless woe;
> Behind him hound, and horse, and horn,
> And, "Hark away, and holla, ho!" (430)

The terrifying being which so relentlessly pursues the evil Wildgrave is the eponymous Wild Huntsman. Variations of this tale are

> found all over Germany, and in neighbouring countries where the German race has penetrated during the migrations, in an endless variety of forms. Wodan-Odin was the Psychopompos, the leader of the departed into Walhalla. The Wild Huntsman, who has taken his place, careers along the sky with his ghostly retinue.
> (Blind, Karl, "Wodan, the Wild Huntsman, and the Wandering Jew", in *The Wandering Jew*, ed. Hasan-Rokem, p. 177)

There are also many close links between the Wild Huntsman — or Wodan — and the Wandering Jew. Even in the last-quoted verse extract from Scott, we see one of the two characteristic features of the Wandering Jew specifically identified by Anderson: "[T]he [. . .]

piercing glance of the Jew, whose eyes are 'large, black, and sparkling'". This can be compared with Scott's description of the Wild Huntsman: "His eye like midnight lightning glows". However, there are far more convincing parallels between the two characters, some of these lying in the area of philology, for example:

> Odin or Wodan, the Spirit of the Universe, was conceived by our forefathers as a great Wanderer. His very name describes him as the All-pervading. *Watan* in Old High German, *wadan* in Old Saxon, and *vadha,* in Old Norse, are of the same root as the Latin *vadere* and [. . .] the German *wandern* — to go, to permeate, to wander about. Wodan is the Breath of the World; his voice is in the rushing wind. Restlessly he travels through all lands. The Sanskrit *wâta,* which etymologically belongs to the same root, signifies the wind; and the wind, in that early Aryan tongue, is also called "the Ever Travelling". (Blind 175)

Finally, there is a tale from the Harz Mountains which seems to prove beyond doubt that "the phantom figure of the Wandering Jew" ["A phantom among men"] has been "grafted upon that of the great Wanderer and World-Hunter, Wodan" (Blind 181):

> There it is said that the Wild Huntsman careers "over the seven mountain-towns every seven years". The reason given for his ceaseless wanderings is, that "he would not allow our Lord Jesus Christ to quench his thirst at a river, nor at a water-trough for cattle, from both of which he drove him away, telling him that he ought to drink from a horse-pond". For this reason the

> Wild Huntsman must wander about for ever, and feed upon horse-flesh. And whoever calls out after him, when his ghostly chase comes by, will see the Wild Huntsman turn round, and be compelled by him to eat horse-flesh too.
>
> (Blind 181)

So, in the sublimely Gothic world of *The Wild Huntsman*, that extremely violent item of Shelley's nursery reading, we can clearly identify the origins of the wild, hunting Maenads; of Actaeon, the hunter hunted; of the inner conflict of the mature poet's Dionysus / Orpheus identity; and of the mysterious, wandering, branded Stranger of stanzas 31-34 of *Adonais*, identified as the Wandering Jew, and apotheosized as the god Wodan.

IX. *The Triumph of Life* — The Living Dead and the Car of Life

In his last great poem, unfinished at his untimely death, Shelley follows in the footsteps of Virgil and Dante, stylistically and thematically. *The Triumph of Life* is Shelley's record of his own descent into Hell, and the poem's verse form is based on the tercets used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, and by Petrarch in his *Triumphs*. The narrative and basic structure of Shelley's poem is also based generally on these works, particularly on the first five Cantos of the *Inferno*, the last six Cantos of the *Purgatorio*, and the *Triumphs* of Fame, Death and Love. From these fourteenth-century Italian works, in spirit far more Gothic than Renaissance, Shelley invests his own poem with the atmosphere of ubiquitous, all-encompassing mortality so powerfully conveyed by Petrarch in *The Triumph of Death*; and also with the *Inferno's* stark and tragic message of the unavoidable results of sin. However, in Shelley's poem, wrong motives, and their effects, are shown to be virtually unavoidable, there being, in all but the most noble souls, a disastrous vulnerability to the warping effects of a Life which corrupts almost all human endeavour, even that intended to be the best (lines 228-31). Also, unlike the worlds of Dante and Petrarch, Shelley's nightmare universe contains no Beatrice or Laura. Certainly, even allowing for its unfinished and relatively unedited state, *The Triumph of Life* offers both reader and narrator only the faintest possibility of redeeming love, human or divine; and only the very slightest glimpse of any heavenly beacon which might indicate the way out of what appears to be a universal Hell, from which all traces of the numinous are entirely absent.

It is certain that Shelley's final poem strongly reflects his own feelings about the hellish nature of life — in this world or in any other — during his last weeks. At the time of his writing his final poem, around the end of May and the beginning of June, 1822, Shelley was still coming to terms with the recent death of Allegra, the child of Byron and Claire Clairmont. Mary Shelley was recovering from a near-fatal miscarriage, and Shelley himself was frustrated and depressed about his lack of recognition as a poet, and was becoming increasingly subject to disturbing paranormal experiences involving ghosts, doppelgangers and ominous messages (Holmes 712-27). In a letter to Trelawny, dated June 18, 1822, he clearly shows that he is at least contemplating suicide, regardless of the degree of seriousness with which he views it as a possible solution to his problems:

> You of course enter into society at Leghorn; should you meet with any scientific person capable of preparing the *Prussic Acid*, or *essential oil of bitter almonds* I should regard it as a great kindness if you could procure me a small quantity [. . .] I need not tell you I have no intention of suicide at present, — but I confess it would be a comfort to me to hold in my possession that golden key to the chamber of perpetual rest.
>
> (432-33)

It is therefore hardly surprising, taking into account Shelley's current state of mind, that *The Triumph of Life* contains the most terrifyingly graphic and appallingly concrete Gothic imagery of all his poetry. It is as if, rather than his last poem being the product of the final, most highly-developed stage of his philosophical scepticism, it is a sincere representation of life as he increasingly felt it to be, with spectral figures

drawn, as it were, from the flesh; from those disturbing apparitions whose increasingly frequent manifestations he felt to be indicative that suicide could be no solution when life is everlasting, however agonising that life may be.

This vision of the world of the damned is presented to us by an initially faceless narrator, who lacks any of the overt, Shelleyan subjectivity of the speakers in "Ode to the West Wind" and *Adonais.* This figure is a kind of decontextualised Dante, who is accompanied by a degraded and disfigured Virgil, manifested in the barely-recognised shape of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These are essentially non-heroic characters, who also have none of the qualities of the Gothic villain. Rousseau is seen to have no agency. He is the victim of Life — what can be seen as his own life. He can also be looked upon as the narrator's alter-ego, the two characters reflecting and sharing each other's victim status, as we accompany them through the world of the dead. As in "Ode to the West Wind" (another poem which Shelley had written in an English version of Dante's terza rima), the souls of the dead (in this case those same lukewarm spirits whom Dante describes in *Inferno*, Canto III, lines 35-36, as "the sad souls of those who lived / Without occasion for infamy or praise") are compared in *The Triumph of Life* to autumn leaves:

> All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know
> Whither he went, or whence he came, or why
> He made one of the multitude, yet so
>
> Was borne amid the crowd as through the sky
> One of the million leaves of summer's bier. (47-51)

These dead souls are not "like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing" ("Ode to the West Wind", line 3). They have been enchanted by their own life, by Life itself. They have thoroughly enchanted themselves, creating not only terrifyingly realistic projections of their own fears (54-61), but also phantoms of themselves, as Shelley describes in lines 486-505, in the poem's characteristically Gothic style. The world of *The Triumph of Life* is a hideously Gothic world in which the phantoms of the dead are fleshed out, only to be reduced yet again to blood, pulp and dust; a world which is infested by the unreal projections of these ghosts — "and some did fling / Shadows of shadows, yet unlike themselves, / Behind them" (487-489) — and also of their vain aspirations, fantasies and nightmares:

> [T]he grove
>
> Grew dense with shadows to its inmost covers,
> The earth was grey with phantoms, and the air
> Was peopled with dim forms, as when there hovers
>
> A flock of vampire-bats before the glare
> Of the tropic sun, bringing ere evening
> Strange night upon some Indian isle [. . .] . (480-486)

This is the phantasmagoric universe of the living dead, of the nightmare Life-in-Death. It is a place of momentary ecstasy and unbearable degradation and suffering for the vast majority of its inhabitants, with the possibility of expiation and self-awareness reserved for the very few. It is the world of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as much as that of *The Divine Comedy* or Petrarch's *Triumphs*. Coleridge was one of Shelley's

favourite poets, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was Shelley's favourite poem by that writer (Holmes 332). The above quotation is almost certainly derived from the terrifying imagery in the following extract, and there is no doubt that Shelley's lines have captured the unearthly magic of Coleridge's Gothic masterpiece, [1] which both the Shelleys had read at least as recently as February 22, 1821 (*Journal* 642).

> The western wave was all a-flame.
> The day was well nigh done!
> Almost upon the western wave
> Rested the broad bright Sun;
> When that strange shape drove suddenly
> Betwixt us and the Sun [. . .]
> And is that Woman all her crew?
> Is that a DEATH? and are there two?
> Is DEATH that woman's mate? [. . .]
> Her skin was as white as leprosy,
> The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold.
>
> (171-76, 187-89, 192-94)

Shelley's terrifying metaphorical silhouettes are, like Coleridge's, seen against the "tropic sun" as it sets. They are the silhouettes of vampire bats, the living symbols of the undead who, like the Mariner himself,

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Russell Noyes, ed. *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.

are the subjects of "The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH [. . .] Who thicks man's blood with cold". Although Shelley writes of vampire-bats, rather than examples of the supernatural species of blood-sucker, it is quite clear that the latter are foremost in his mind as he describes the projected passions and superstitions of the self-obsessed (Reiman 79-80). There is only one occasion in all of Shelley's works when the actual vampire is specifically mentioned. [2] This occurs in *Prometheus Unbound*, in the section where the Spirit of the Hour describes a world devoid of evil, a world in which:

> None with firm sneer trod out in his own heart
> The sparks of love and hope, till there remained
> Those bitter ashes, a soul self-consumed,
> And the wretch crept, a vampire among men,
> Infecting all with his own hideous ill. (III.iv.144-148)

This negation is surely a most apt description of Count Cenci, of all Shelley's creations the one which is closest to the vampire; and the *Triumph's* phantasmagorical world of ecstasy, suffering, passion, cruelty and living death, is seen clearly prefigured in the corrupting, corrosive, polluting, vampire realm of *The Cenci* (Twitchell 79-89). As Twitchell in *The Living Dead* states so concisely, as he identifies the Count as one

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2 This is surprising, as Shelley had been well acquainted with the living dead since his early youth through the horrific oriental Gothicism of Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer*, in which the vampire first appears in English literature (Twitchell 35-38). Later on he became even more familiar with them in Byron's *The Giaour*, published in 1813, Coleridge's *Christabel* of 1816, and almost certainly in Polidori's short story, *The Vampyre*, published 1819, which had its origins in 1816, when its writer was living with Byron at the Villa Diodati, near to Shelley, on Lake Geneva.

of the subjects of his study:

> The major theme of the play is the dynamics of evil, and the vampire as both solipsist and casuist is a ghoulishly apt mythologem of the centripetal and centrifugal forces of disorder. For the vampire is both a festering centre of evil and a contaminating carrier, an ambiguous destroyer of others and preserver of himself. (83)

Finally, linking the above passages from Shelley's *Triumph* and Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* together even more closely, is the close proximity of skeletal figures to both the above extracts. In the case of *The Ancient Mariner*, the ship's silhouette is that of a "skeleton ship", as the poem's accompanying prose narrative describes it; and DEATH, particularly if referred to as "a DEATH", would certainly have been conceived by readers of Coleridge's day as a skeleton, as indeed it has been frequently depicted in illustrations to the poem. In *The Triumph of Life*, "the old anatomies", or skeletons — again, images appearing very infrequently in Shelley's poems — are encountered just fourteen lines past the vampire bats. It seems certain that, at least in this section of his poem on life-in-death, Shelley had Coleridge's sublimely Gothic tale very much in mind.

It is the living-dead who inhabit the horrifyingly Gothic world of Shelley's last great poem, yet so many of them appear to be imbued with a robust and frenetic physicality. These are amongst those figures who accompany Life's triumphal car:

> Swift, fierce and obscene
> The wild dance maddens in the van, and those
> Who lead it, fleet as shadows on the green,

Outspeed the chariot and without repose
Mix with each other in tempestuous measure
To savage music . . . Wilder as it grows,

They, tortured by the agonizing pleasure,
Convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun
Of that fierce spirit, whose unholy leisure

Was soothed by mischief since the world begun,
Throw back their heads and loose their streaming hair [. . .] .

(137-147)

Again we see images strongly reminiscent of Milton's "Bacchus and his Revellers, the Race / Of that wild Rout that tore the Thracian Bard / In Rhodope", the above quotation from *The Triumph* quite clearly presenting the visual convention which Shelley invariably associated with the Maenads, those lust-crazed, uncontrollably violent female followers of Dionysus. As Bradley pointed out in his *Notes on Shelley's "Triumph of Life"*: "The description of the dancers recalls, in some respects, Shelley's description of a dance of Maenads sculptured in relief on the pedestal of a statue of Minerva in the Gallery of Florence" (Bradley 448). Here, Bradley is referring to Shelley's notes on sculptures he had seen in Rome and in the Uffizzi Gallery in Florence. These notes were composed in 1819, it appears for the poet's own use, and almost certainly were never intended for publication (Shelley, ed. Clark 343). Reiman also quotes from these notes in his comments on "Ode to the West Wind" (Shelley, eds. Reiman and Powers 222n), yet neither he nor Bradley mentions the fact that although the figures in question were seen on what Bradley calls

"the pedestal" of a conventionally "Classical" statue of Minerva — the goddess of wisdom and the liberal arts — they were in fact carved upon what appeared to be an altar to Bacchus, a deity whose attributes contrast dramatically with those of Minerva. Shelley states that "[t]his statue [of Minerva] happens to be placed on an altar, the subject of the reliefs of which are in a spirit wholly the reverse [of Minerva's qualities]. It was probably an altar to Bacchus, possibly a funerary urn" (Shelley, ed. Clark 349). Shelley continues, describing as he does so that wealth of Classically Gothic, terrifyingly Dionysian imagery which I have previously shown as being so central not only to *The Triumph*, but also to "Ode to the West Wind" and *Adonais*:

> The tremendous spirit of superstition aided by drunkenness and producing something beyond insanity seems to have caught them in its whirlwinds and to bear them over the earth as the rapid volutions of a tempest bear the ever-changing trunk of a waterspout [. . .] Their hair loose and floating seems caught in the tempest of their own tumultuous motion, their heads are thrown back leaning with a strange inanity upon their necks [. . .] One — perhaps Agave with the head of Pentheus — has a human head in one hand and in the other a great knife; another has a spear with its pine cone, which was their thyrsus; another dances with mad voluptuousness; the fourth is dancing to a kind of tambourine.
>
> (Shelley, P. B. *Shelley's Prose*, Ed. Clark 349)

Bradley writes of the imagery contained in the first sentence of the above-quoted passage — a sentence which includes the highly significant phrase, "caught them in its whirlwinds" — as having an important part to

play in the origin of lines 144 and 145 of *The Triumph*, in contrast to Reiman's association of Shelley's lines with the carnal sinners who are swept along by whirling winds in Canto V of Dante's *Inferno* (Reiman 37). Bradley also convincingly shows that the passage, "Their hair loose and floating seems caught in the tempest of their own tumultuous motion, their heads are thrown back leaning with a strange inanity upon their necks", [3] lies behind line 147 of *The Triumph*: "Throw back their heads and loose their streaming hair" (Bradley 448). Yet, notwithstanding Shelley's customary use of the Maenad figure primarily as a symbol of irrational destruction and uncontrollable violence — and only secondarily as one of blind lust — Bradley considers quite reasonably that the "tremendous spirit" in the first line of the above-quoted extract from Shelley's Uffizzi Gallery notes, largely indicates sexual excitement. This is certainly true of the dancing revellers in *The Triumph of Life*, as they are portrayed in lines 136-55, and accords with lines 143-46, in which "that fierce spirit" is quite clearly intended to be interpreted as uncontrollable sexual desire, or lust, from which "the rapid whirlwinds" are spun, and in which the dancers are also "spun". The only violence the frenetic revellers perpetrate is upon themselves, and their only destructiveness is in self-destruction. The very sexual act which culminates their wild dance, "swift, fierce and obscene", is shown in lines 152-158 to be leading to a literal, as much as to a figurative, death.

Celebrating the Platonic concept of a truth-revealing death, as opposed to the illusions of earthly life, Petrarch's *Triumphs* are optimistic expressions of Christian Neo-Platonism presented in the light of fresh,

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[3] I have here quoted Shelley's original passage, rather than Bradley's misquoted version.

new perspectives on the Classical world. Petrarch quite obviously saw the Roman victory celebration in a way which was essentially similar to how the Romans themselves saw it, no doubt deriving his positive ideas of the Roman triumph from descriptions in Ovid and Lactantius, as well as from those affirming attitudes towards antiquity so characteristic of the writer and scholar of the early Renaissance (Petrarch, ed.Carnicelli 20). In Shelley's case, however, the image of the triumph always had associations of oppression, cruelty and violence (Holmes 717-18).

In his last poem, Shelley gives us a sublime spectacle of the arrival of the triumph. The multitude initially encountered by the narrator, Dante's "sad souls who lived / Without occasion for infamy or praise", make way for Life's car, with its accompanying Bacchic revellers: "The million with fierce song and maniac dance / Raging around [. . .]" (110-11). Shelley makes it clear that, in this part of the poem at least (lines 111-20), the triumph of Life is intended to resemble closely the Roman triumph, with its cheering crowds who had unwittingly enslaved themselves by exchanging a noble Republic for a corrupt, materialistic Empire; and with the people they had conquered yoked like animals to symbolise their subjection to Rome. Adulation of the oppressor by the oppressed must be seen as the sublime pinnacle of political power, particularly if accompanied by guilt and self-condemnation on the part of the oppressed. This closely resembles that process of hegemony suffered by Beatrice Cenci, that means by which the powerful contrive to make the ordinary individual experience guilt for a situation brought about by those in power themselves. The triumph of Life — Life being seen as the tyrannical Gothic villain of the poem — can be regarded as following this path, the young being taken over by life's uncontrollable urges, and then being made to experience the self-destructive consequences of these apparently natural compulsions. Also, feelings of

inferiority and self-revulsion are seen to be experienced by the old with the aging and breaking down of the body — the unavoidable result of life's processes; and self-condemnation takes place as increasingly ineffective attempts are made to submit to life's urges and dictates. These victims of old age and decrepitude who follow behind Life's chariot (lines 164-74) present a most distressing picture, victims as they are of physical decay, embittering impotence, or even worse, the desire to perform sexual acts that they are no longer physically capable of carrying out.

However, the most horrifyingly Gothic fate is reserved for the self-destructive young who follow unquestioningly life's seemingly healthy, natural urges, those riotous revellers who have relinquished all self-awareness, and who are unfortunate enough to fall beneath the wheels of Life's chariot. Following their cataclysmic sexual activity described in lines 150-58,

> ere the shock cease to tingle
> One falls and then another in the path
> Senseless, nor is the desolation single,
>
> Yet ere I can say *where* the chariot hath
> Past over them; nor other trace I find
> But as of foam after the Ocean's wrath
>
> Is spent upon the desert shore. (158-64)

In considering the above lines, Harold Bloom, in his *Shelley's Mythmaking*, likens them to a description of the progress of a juggernaut: "The juggernaut passes over them too suddenly for the points of contact

to be established by the observer, and the lovers are reduced to being the backwash of the chariot" (Bloom 250).

Nowhere in the poem does Shelley describe Life's car. Its alternative designation of chariot gives the impression that it is the small, light vehicle in which the Roman general traditionally led the triumphal procession; but to be able to crush the thronging dancers so easily, it must surely be seen as a far more heavy and substantial vehicle. In fact, we have to go to the ultimate horror of Robert Southey's *The Curse of Kehama*, [4] his long, Gothic / Oriental narrative poem, to find what can reasonably be seen as the most convincing original of Life's car (Swaminathan 68n). Medwin records that in 1810, the year in which the Gothic novels *Zastrozzi* and *St Irvine* were published, Shelley's favourite contemporary poet was Southey, and Holmes informs us that "he [Shelley] knew Southey's massive oriental verse narrative *Thalaba* almost by heart. Shelley liked to chant the demonic formula from Southey's *Curse of Kehama* while fixing his eye on his companion" (Holmes 30); and Clark states that "*The Curse of Kehama* became his [Shelley's] favourite poem" (Shelley, ed, Clark 28). Lines 74-85 of *The Triumph* can be seen as a fairly close re-working of the following stanza of Southey's poem. Shelley's young moon becomes a herald of the approaching storm as she bears the ghost of her dead mother. In *The Curse of Kehama,* the silent Night has been startled by the sound of brazen trumpets, of the type blown by heralds:

> O silent Night, how have they startled thee

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4 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Robert Southey. *Poetical Works of Robert Southey: Complete in One Volume.* Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1829.

With the brazen trumpet's blare!
And thou, O Moon! whose quiet light serene
Filleth wide heaven, and bathing hill and wood,
Spreads o'er the peaceful valley like a flood,
How have they dimm'd thee with the torches' glare,
Which round yon moving pageant flame and flare,
As the wild rout, with deafening song and shout,
Fling their long flashes out,
That, like infernal lightnings, fire the air.

(*The Curse of Kehama*, Canto XIV, stanza 4)

There are more instances where quite detailed comparisons can be made of both extracts. For example, in *The Triumph*, "[t]he throng grew wilder, as the woods of June / When the South wind shakes the extinguished day" (75-76), while *The Curse of Kehama* describes the activities of "the wild rout". These rioters virtually extinguish the moonlight with "the torches' glare", which is so reminiscent of Shelley's "cold glare" which "obscured with [ ] light / The Sun" in lines 77-79 of *The Triumph*. The basic, striking similarity between the two quotations is such that we even see a similar pastoral image occurring in each of these extracts of so few lines, using the word "wood", and "woods". Yet most striking of all, we can see in the following lines from *The Curse of Kehama* a hideously, graphically sublime expansion of lines 158-64 of *The Triumph*:

A thousand pilgrims strain
Arm, shoulder, breast and thigh, with might and main,
To drag that sacred wain,
And scarce can draw along the enormous load.

Prone fall the frantic votaries in its road,
And, calling on the God,
Their self-devoted bodies there they lay
To pave his chariot-way.
On Jaga-Naut they call,
The ponderous Car rolls on, and crushes all.
Through blood and bones it ploughs its dreadful path.
Groans rise unheard; the dying cry,
And death and agony
Are trodden under foot by yon mad throng,
Who follow close, and thrust the deadly wheels along.
(Canto XIV. Stanza 5)

Any doubts or confusion concerning the appearance of Life's car are resolved by Southey's description of the wagon of Jaga-Naut:

Uprear'd on twenty wheels elate,
Huge as a Ship, the bridal car appear'd;
Loud creak its ponderous wheels, as through the gate
A thousand Bramins drag the enormous load.
There, throned aloft in state,
The Image of the seven-headed God
Came forth from his abode. (Canto XIV Stanza 3)

If the above example did not provide a convincing enough argument for the main source of so much of the atmosphere and imagery in those sections of *The Triumph* under discussion, Southey devotes a whole, long section on Jaga'Naut in his copious notes to the poem, which were undoubtedly pored over by the young Shelley.

Southey's description of the progress of the juggernaut constitutes one of the most horrifying examples of the Gothic sublime in the literature of the period, and it is no wonder that the youthful Shelley was so enamoured of *The Curse of Kehama*, nor in any way surprising that he subsequently injected so much of its overwhelmingly Gothic terror into *The Triumph of Life*, his ultimate account of the blind, destructive power of human ignorance and lack of self-knowledge, and of the seemingly inescapable, hellish worlds of agony and degradation in which we become enmeshed through our own self-will and spiritual blindness.

X. *The Triumph of Life* — Rousseau, the Shape, and the "shape all light"

However sublimely horrific we may consider the bloody, relentless progress of Life's chariot to be, it is Shelley's description of the initial arrival of Life (lines 79-93) which must be seen as the poem's most powerful expression of the Gothic sublime. The first simile of Life we encounter is where "[t]he Poet compares the curved chariot and its gloomy passenger to the new moon bearing the ghost of the old moon in its arms" (Reiman 29). Shelley's closest source of this image was most likely the lines which introduce Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode". [1] These lines are taken from the traditional Scottish poem, "The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence", and relate the ominous nature of a lunar phenomenon held to presage tempest and disaster at sea:

> Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
> With the old Moon in her arms:
> And I fear, I fear, my Master dear!
> We shall have a deadly storm.

Shelley almost certainly had first-hand knowledge of this ballad, which was first published in that pioneer work of the Medieval Gothic, Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, and however much he might have been influenced indirectly by themes and imagery

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1 Quoted from from Russell Noyes, ed. *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.

in Coleridge's gloomy "Dejection", it is the haunting extract from the ancient ballad which quite obviously had the most powerful effect on Shelley in the composition of his final work, the echo of these ominous lines helping to generate an atmosphere of fear-stricken anticipation as the poet introduces the terrifyingly Gothic entity described in lines 87-93. In the sinister, featureless, crouching figure are concentrated the sublimes of terror and obscurity. The most apparent original of the terrifying Shape is Death, from Book Two of *Paradise Lost*:

> The other shape,
> If shape it might be call'd that shape had none
> Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
> Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,
> For each seem'd either; black it stood as Night,
> Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,
> And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem'd his head
> The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on. (Bk II. 666-73)

The above extract was, as I have already pointed out in an earlier section of this thesis, described as follows by Burke: "In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree" (Burke 55). This statement could apply just as aptly to Shelley's lines, their derivation from, and close association with, their Miltonic original only serving to increase their power to evoke the Gothic sublime, and to uncover whatever qualities of the numinous may be experienced through that evocation. The two images have an extremely close resemblance — if such could ever be said of that which is obscure and formless — and Shelley's poem (lines 91-93) even contains an echo of Book II, line 672 of Milton's poem in "what seemed the head"; and Shelley's use of the word

"Shape" in line 87, Death's ambiguous epithet in *Paradise Lost*, further links the two passages.

Yet although Shelley is so indebted to the Gothic sublime of *Paradise Lost*, it is in Milton's *Comus* [2] that we can see the origins of the destructive lust so closely associated with Life's car. It has long since been established that Shelley, in *The Triumph of Life*, alludes to a number of highly significant episodes in Milton's early masque, but as far as I can tell, there has been no previous reference to what is probably the most sublime passage in that strange work of contrasting light and darkness:

> Hail, goddess of nocturnal sport,
> Dark-veiled Cotytto, to whom the secret flame
> Of midnight torches burns; mysterious dame,
> That ne'er art called but when the dragon womb
> Of Stygian darkness spits her thickest gloom,
> And makes one blot of all the air,
> Stay thy cloudy ebon chair
> Wherein thou rid'st with Hecat' [. . .] . (128-35)

Here, the depraved, lustful Comus invokes Cotytto, or Cotys, a goddess whose festival, the Cotyttia, was celebrated with orgiastic licentiousness (*The Wordsworth Classical Dictionary* 127). Cotytto originated in Thrace, an area notorious in the Classical world for savagery, witchcraft and magic, and for being the region which gave birth to the ecstatic religion of Dionysus. She is the goddess of the frenzied

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2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from John Hollander and Frank Kermode, eds. *The Literature of Renaissance England.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

multitudes who dance before Life's chariot, "[s]wift, fierce and obscene"; and in *Comus* — and also, by allusion, in *The Triumph of Life* — is closely associated with Hecate, the moon goddess, who also was the goddess of Hell, and as such was identified with Persephone. Cotytto can only be summoned when the night is darkest, "when the dragon womb / Of Stygian darkness spits her thickest gloom, / And makes one blot of all the air". These striking lines describe the formless, obscuring "blot" of darkness as originating from around the Styx, the first river of the Underworld to be encountered by the newly-dead; and significantly, the birthplace of this gloom is called a "dragon's womb", the dragon having always been — in European tradition, at least — associated with the corrupting and destructive power of the most material forms of temptation — of jewels and precious metals. Cotytto, like Shelley's Life, rides a chariot or "chair", which is, like the one in which we encounter Shelley's Shape, closely associated with the moon, manifested as Hecate: "[T]hy cloudy ebon chair / Wherein thou rid'st with Hecat' " (*Comus*, lines 134-35); and in line 85 of *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley also refers to the metaphorical lunar chariot as a "chair". Hecate [3] is the goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, and is also identified with the moon as Selene or Luna; and, with increasing relevance to the development of *The Triumph of Life* as I interpret the poem, she is identified with Persephone in the Underworld, and with Artemis [4] on Earth. She also sends

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3 See J. Lemprière, *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary* (Revised and rewritten 1949), ed. F. A. Wright (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1879) 266.

4 See William Smith, *The Wordsworth Classical Dictionary* (First published as *A Smaller Classical Dictionary*, by John Murray, London, 1852) (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1996) 189.

nocturnal visitations of ghosts and demons from the nether regions, and, as one who dwells on graves, will often be encountered "[c]rouching within the shadow of a tomb".

The identification of the figure in Life's chariot with Cotytto and Hecate enables us more easily to understand Shelley's intentions as he links the dark, shadowy Shape with the blinding light which precedes its appearance, a light so intense that it "obscured [. . .] [t]he Sun" (78-79). The beams that hide the sun remain after the chariot's arrival, and all subsequent scenes in which Life's car is present are lit with a sickeningly bright light, which mercilessly illuminates the orgiastic frenzies of the multitudes, the horrific progress of the juggernaut, and all the sordid, individual tragedies of the aged sinners. Sublime darkness has disappeared forever from Shelley's poetry. He is now intent on portraying the glittering, tempting, colourful, illusory world of Life's domains, in this world or the next. From now on, every scene and image in the poem not flooded with Life's blinding light is shown in luminous, fluorescent technicolour, or in a harsh, metallic sheen — the colours of Medieval tableaux, of the nightmare realm of the *Ancient Mariner*, or of the Gothic, stained glass world of the *Faerie Queene*. As well as a glittering, dazzling realm of deceit and self-delusion, Cotytto and Hecate have brought into being a bright and well-defined world of the horribly beautiful, with its own variety of the sublime which, like that of *The Cenci*, will never lead us into the presence of the numinous. An atmosphere of sheer Gothic horror increasingly pervades the poem, and any sense of uncanny otherness arising from the sublime is taken over by our awareness of the seemingly everlasting, inescapable, corrupting, deforming power of life.

It is the last-mentioned factor which is so strongly manifested in the figure of Rousseau. Yet Murphy can surely be excused for his

categorisation of Rousseau as a version of the Gothic villain, as he presents us with what, at first sight, is an apparently convincing list of the French writer's typically Gothic attributes:

> [H]is seerlike pose, his quest to find the meaning of life, his curse that results from the inability to find this meaning and yet become [sic] captive to the quest, his melancholy, uncertainty, and isolation in combination with his mysterious, awesome experiences are all related to the Gothic mode.
>
> (Murphy 124)

However, genuinely Gothic qualities are as remote from Rousseau as are those of the sublime; and it is hardly necessary to mention that he is lacking in any of those literary or historical associations which could otherwise give rise to a general Gothic atmosphere, or to specific allusions of a Gothic nature.

We see Rousseau clearly as the author of his own misery. There is a hideously ironical justice in the situation of the proponent of the Natural Man being absorbed into the natural world so entirely. Lines 180-88 describe the transfigured Rousseau, and graphically convey what is, in Bloom's words, "the Dantesque horror of his state, in which his desires have been mockingly fulfilled" (Bloom 255). This image is grotesque rather than terrifying, and any initial sense of shock or horror quickly subsides into feelings of mingled repulsion and pity. Here is a hideous being who wields no awesome, terrible power; a creature whose greatest crimes have been inflicted upon himself, and whose horrific appearance can be guaranteed to embody, in this life and the next, the spiritual condition of a considerable proportion of the poem's readers. Yet if we look upon *The Triumph of Life* as a Dantesque exploration of

the next life, experienced in the light of human morality and self-awareness, and couched in what are generally considered as the most Italianate and most finely crafted examples of terza rima written in English (Jacoff 246-48), then Rousseau can be seen as a grotesque parody of Virgil, Dante's Roman guide — one who is tranquil in the face of the horrors of Hell, an example of human nobility unaffected by fear or desire.

In his letter to John Gisborne, written in Pisa on April 10, 1822, Shelley makes reference to *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloïse*, Rousseau's novel (Allott 245-249). In this letter, Shelley writes of his feelings of admiration for certain illustrations to Goethe's *Faust*, executed by Friedrich Retzsch, who is not mentioned by name in the letter:

> What etchings those are! I am never satiated with looking at them, & I fear it is the only sort of translation of which *Faust* is susceptible — I never perfectly understood the Har[t]z Mountain scene, until I saw the etching. — And then, Margaret in the summer house with Faust! [. . .] the etching certainly excited me here more than the poem it illustrated. — Do you remember the 54th letter of the 1st part of the *Nouvelle Heloïse*? Goethe in a subsequent scene evidently had that letter in his mind, & this etching is an idealism of it. (407)

This letter, from Rousseau's novel, [5] and autobiographical of the

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5 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Eloisa, or a Series of Original Letters*. 2 vols. 1803 ed. Trans W. Kenrick. Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989. Vol 1.

author in spirit at least, tells of the overpowering emotions experienced by St Preux when hiding in Julie's bedroom:

> How charming is this place of concealment! Every thing around me serves to inflame the ardour of my passion [. . .] Every sense is at once intoxicated with imaginary bliss. An almost imperceptible sweetness, more exquisite than the scent of the rose, and more volatile than that of the Iris, exhales from every part [. . .] these stays, which encircle and embrace your slender — Heavens, what a charming shape! how the top of the stomacher is waved in two gentle curves — luxurious sight! the whalebone has yielded to their impression! — delicious impression! let me devour it with kisses! — O gods! how shall I be able to bear? (243-44)

Rousseau, as St Preux, may project a character which appears sympathetic, charming, natural, and eminently human; but its self-satisfying, sensual, deceptive, exploitative aspect forces us to see Shelley's depiction of the great French thinker as a parody of one who was the spiritual guide of the writer of Christendom's greatest religious poem, as well as being the mentor of Rome's august first emperor.

Shelley based his Rousseau character as much on the author's novel as on his autobiography, each work being considered to complement and illustrate the other. In *The Triumph of Life,* Shelley has portrayed Rousseau as "the chastened prophet of the inherent goodness of the state of nature" who is suffering, as did St Preux, chiefly as a result of his own selfish actions (Bloom 254): that is to say, from the pitfalls inherent in a philosophy based on *amour de soi,* or self-interest (as opposed to *amour-propre,* or selfish-interest (Broome 39-40)).

The increasingly non-Gothic Rousseau can even be seen as a parody of the ironic outcast. His pretensions are to humanity rather than to aristocracy. It is his counterpart, the poem's elusive and sinister femme fatale, who brings back to *The Triumph of Life* some sense of the Gothic sublime, albeit of a highly subtle, rarefied and enigmatic nature. This is the "shape all light", who embodies pain and pleasure, evil as well as beauty, ecstasy and despair. Being entirely beautiful, she is not seen as an example of the "horribly beautiful", but the spiritual essence of the vision she vouchsafes is as hideous and as deadly as the face of Medusa, and, like the Gorgon, she exists in a state where beauty and horror co-exist, as theories of the sublime are pushed to the limit.

In Shelley's account of Rousseau and his femme fatale, the French thinker can now be seen as a grotesque, degraded version of Dante himself (Bradley 442-43). The following lines from *The Triumph of Life*, in which Rousseau describes his situation just prior to his first meeting with the "shape all light", parallel quite closely the theme and mood of *Purgatorio*, Canto 28, lines 1-48, [6] where Dante finds himself in the Earthly Paradise, at the summit of the Mountain of Purgatory, walking by the banks of a Lethean stream, where he encounters the beautiful Matilda, [7] who is Beatrice's helper and the embodiment of Justice:

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6 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy* (First published by Oxford University Press, 1981. First published as a World's Classics paperback, 1993). Trans. C. H. Sisson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. The lines introducing and featuring Matilda in Canto 28 constituted Shelley's favourite section of *Purgatorio*, and the only part of *The Divine Comedy* which he attempted to translate. See Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 313-29.

7 See note by David H. Higgins in Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 636-638.

In the April prime
When all the forest tops began to burn

With kindling green, touched by the azure clime
Of the young year, I found myself asleep
Under a mountain, which from unknown time

Had yawned into a cavern high and deep,
And from it came a gentle rivulet
Whose water like clear air in its calm sweep

Bent the soft grass and kept forever wet
The stems of the sweet flowers, and filled the grove
With sound which all who hear must needs forget

All pleasure and all pain, all hate and love,
Which they had known before that hour of rest [. . .] .
(308-20)

In Canto 29 of *Purgatorio,* Matilda leads Dante towards a vision of the Triumph of the Church, in which the seven candlesticks flare into a miraculous rainbow:

And I saw the flames, as they advanced,
Leaving the air behind them coloured,
And they had the appearance of extended streamers;

So that there remained seven bands
Clearly marked, and all in those colours

From which the sun makes his bow, and Delia her girdle.

(*Purgatorio*, Canto 29, lines 73-78)

These candlesticks and rainbow represent not only God's message of reconciliation to Noah, but also the sevenfold spirit of God and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (Dante 640n). However, in the following lines, which are a diabolical parody of Dante, the "shape all light" assumes the shape of Iris, the rainbow of the Classical world, as she leads Rousseau to the deforming, destructive chariot of Life, and makes an arch of triumph over it: "A moving arch of victory the vermilion / And green and azure plumes of Iris had / Built high over her wind-winged pavilion" (439-41). In *The Triumph of Life*, the rainbow — as a manifestation of Rousseau's femme fatale — symbolises life's gorgeous, deadly illusions, and the way in which the pure, white light of Eternity is obscured and stained by sublunar mutability and the destructive, corrosive forces of life. Here, Shelley parodies himself, in using symbolism almost identical to that encountered in *Adonais*, yet without engendering any of that liberating sense of the numinous expressed so powerfully in his tribute to Keats: "Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity, / Until Death tramples it to fragments" (*Adonais* 462-64).

Other femmes fatales foremost in Shelley's mind during the writing of his last poem were undoubtedly Keats's eponymous Lamia, and also the Queen of Elfland, from "Thomas the Rhymer", [8] the traditional ballad included by Scott in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* of 1802-03. Yet even though she does seduce Thomas, and enslave him

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8 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Sir Walter Scott. *The Works of Sir Walter Scott*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1995.

with her own brand of Nepenthe, the Queen of Elfland is amoral rather than evil. She shows the bard a third way, between the narrow road to Heaven and the broad highway to Hell, a path between good and evil, which has no relationship whatsoever to Purgatory. The "bonny road, / That winds about the fernie brae" of verse 13 of the first version — part first — of the ballad, is the road to Elfland, the realm of the elemental spirits and the spirits of Nature. In fact, this would have been a happy and appropriate heaven for Rousseau, and approximates the philosopher's inner state as he first sees

> A shape all light, which with one hand did fling
> Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn
> Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing
>
> A silver music on the mossy lawn [. . .] . (352-55)

Yet the "shape all light" herself, through the draught of Nepenthe, leaves Rousseau enmeshed in the realms of illusion, with a distant yet agonising awareness of a lost heaven; and with a fractured, disabled soul, forever incapable of that self-knowledge which is the only means of liberation from life's eternal torments (Swaminathan 70-73). His ecstatic encounter with the "shape all light" has been agonisingly transformed into "[t]he ghost of a forgotten form of sleep" (428), and his experiences with his femme fatale show him now as a somewhat ironic version of the Gothic hero, as the protagonist in what can only be seen as a type of Gothic dream-vision and quest-curse. Yet his is an interior search, covering vast inner distances, and one which can only result in an agonising revelation of the inevitability of ultimate blindness and loss, which contrasts starkly with the essentially liberating vision of the

Burkean experience. Rather than leading to the realms of the sublime, Rousseau's vista of the past is limiting and nightmarish, and epitomises the atmosphere of the latter, and greater, part of the poem. Still full of Gothic horror, the poem's landscapes are surreal rather than sublime, and the panoramic vistas themselves, albeit so bright and well-defined, seem always to teeter on the verge of oblivion.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have endeavoured to trace the origins of Gothic influences in the poetry of Shelley's final, Italian phase, and to examine how the effect of this poetry is so strongly dictated by his use of the Gothic genre, both directly and in a more hidden or allusive manner. However, my chief aim has been to show how Shelley used Gothic elements in his attempts to express the inexpressible, in order to bring the reader closer to that hint of the divine, or numinous, which the poet had come to identify with a transforming force sometimes known as Intellectual Beauty. Shelley saw this as a purifying yet elusive presence which communicated love, hope and meaning to a life which his philosophical scepticism considered as not necessarily doomed to extinction on the death of the physical body.

Throughout this study, it has become increasingly clear to me that in his attempts to express the spiritual and the numinous in his Italian poetry, Shelley conforms very closely to ideas expressed in the writings of both the eighteenth-century Irish aesthetician, Edmund Burke, and the twentieth-century German theologian, Rudolph Otto. However, in considering the works of Shelley's Italian period, it quickly becomes obvious that the poet's use of the Gothic does not always bring us close to an awareness of the numinous. On one hand, in *Prometheus Unbound, Adonais,* and "Ode to the West Wind", Gothic atmosphere, situations and characters constitute essential elements in leading the reader towards some awareness of the numinous, albeit ultimately at the expense of these same Gothic qualities, which disappear (in the two first-mentioned works, at any rate) as the poems' ambience is transformed into a state

which far transcends the Gothic gloom and terrors which gave it birth. On the other hand, those poems I have examined which are far more Gothic in their entirety, such as *The Cenci*, "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery", and *The Triumph of Life*, are almost devoid of the numinous, in spite of containing a considerable number of passages which are strongly evocative of the sublime.

These greatly differing results of Shelley's use of the Gothic are most clearly seen in the consideration of two contrasting dramatic works, both of which the poet was working on during 1819. The main theme of *Prometheus Unbound* is the same as that of *The Cenci* — the resistance of the human spirit in the face of the seemingly infinite power of evil, with the question whether that resistance can endure without being corrupted by revenge and hatred; and it is the evocation of limitless power, with its attendant evils, which gives rise to the most effective expressions of the sublime in both plays. Yet of these two works, it is only in *Prometheus Unbound* that we have been able to become aware of any sense of the numinous. Of all the poetical works of Shelley's Italian period — and indeed of any other period — it is in *Prometheus Unbound* that we have seen the inherent qualities of the Gothic genre used to their greatest effect, enabling Shelley to depict so dramatically the conflict of good and evil, of the positive and the negative, both between powerful, cosmic adversaries, and within each individual human heart.

In this play, we have seen his most striking and adroit use of the contemporary Gothic novel, and how he has invested contemporary Gothic heroes and villains with a power and expressiveness approaching that of their ancient originals in the Classically Gothic plays of Aeschylus; and it has perhaps been surprising to discover that so much of the exotic scenery of his greatest poem had its origins in the bizarre and bloodthirsty novels of William Beckford and Charles Brockden

Brown. This is a strong indication that the influence of popular contemporary material on Shelley at least approached that of the earlier European tradition, and of the ancient world. Yet it is in his recreating the irrational world of the Classical Gothic that Shelley so powerfully echoes, in his portrayals of the agonised Titan, the terrifying Eumenides and the all-powerful Jupiter (and also in his allusions to the frenzied Sybils of the obscure and mysterious oracles of Delphi and Cumae), those words of Socrates in which can be perceived the origins of the unknowable Gothic sublime: "Our greatest blessings come to us by way of madness . . . provided the madness is given us by divine gift"; and in the insane, miscreative, and entirely Gothic, vortex of Jupiter's hate and cruelty, Shelley enables us to glimpse the sublime, imageless truth of Otto's liberated world of the numinous.

In contrast to *Prometheus Unbound, The Cenci* is almost totally lacking in numinous possibilities. Shelley states in the play's preface that the tale of the Cenci family is in the same category as the "sublimest tragic compositions" of Shakespeare and Sophocles, and he shows an acute awareness that "[t]he person who would treat such a subject must increase the ideal, and diminish the actual horror of the events" (Shelley, ed. Reiman and Powers 239). Yet the overpoweringly subterranean Gothic sublime of the play is unable to transport us beyond the restricting, confining historicity of the world of the Cencis, so that no hint of the true, liberating wonder of otherness or the uncanny is able to be sensed beyond the incontrovertible fact of an eternally impenetrable miasma of evil, hatred and corruption; and the all-pervading omnipresence of evil in the person of Count Cenci, and the unjust, inevitable doom of the helpless Beatrice, ensure that no trace of the ideal remains in this work.

In Shelley's entirely aberrant portrait of the above attributes, "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" (1819), the depicted horrors are liberated from any historical context. However, they bring us no closer to the numinous, and although, somewhat surprisingly, this poem lacks *The Cenci's* atmosphere of unremitting misery and hopelessness, it is this short work of Shelley's, more than any other, which links him to those later aesthetic and Modernist developments which will prove so destructive to all that he represents.

With "Ode to the West Wind", Shelley once again enables us to draw closer to some sense of the numinous; and the poem's vibrant, elemental energy contrasts strongly with the enervating, pathological aestheticism of "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci". Yet the spiritual might of the West Wind is essentially earthbound and, as a spirit of Nature, its power is immanent rather than transcendent. Also, unlike the transfigured Prometheus, its role as an agent of social change is closely linked to the often destructive and catastrophic processes of the human, as well as the natural, world. In moral terms, Shelley's association with the sublime power of the West Wind, "Destroyer and Preserver", removes the poet far from such figures as Socrates and Jesus, who are fleetingly glimpsed in *The Triumph of Life* as uncorrupted figures who can return to a transcendent realm.

It is in *Adonais*, his most Platonic work, that we see Shelley's most impressive manipulation of the Gothic, in order to bring us, via the sublime, to a stronger awareness of the numinous. Gothic elements are used here with extreme subtlety in settings which are ostensibly Classical — in Winckelmann's sense of the term — and as I have demonstrated, it is in the poem's allusions and references that the power of the Gothic most strongly manifests itself, even more than in our continuing awareness of the numerous manifestations of death which occur in the

poem. Shelley's utterances are given additional power and universality as he portrays himself, more or less covertly, as Dionysus, Actaeon, Wodan, the Wandering Jew, the Wildgrave, Cain and Christ; as the hunter and the hunted, Gothic villain and innocent Gothic victim; and as he makes obvious his close kinship with those other illustrious literary victims, Orpheus, Milton and Keats, pursued by "the Race / Of that wild Rout that tore the Thracian Bard / In Rhodope". As the rainbow dome of illusion is shattered, the poem's numerous images of Gothic flight give a frenetic dynamism to its Platonic rejection of life in this world: "Die, / If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek! / Follow where all is fled!" (*Adonais* 464-466).

Far removed from the triumphant Platonism of *Adonais*, *The Triumph of Life* presents the reader with a spiritual realm which is utterly ensnared by the rainbow veil of illusion, the deadly enchantment of the "shape all light". Shelley's final poem is a work from which any sense of the numinous has been all but excluded by the unrelenting glare of the all-revealing light of Life which banishes all the mystery and wonder of the sublime. Insofar as it is his final poem, *The Triumph of Life* can be seen as nothing other than Shelley's definitive philosophical statement, which affirms the continuation of life after death, yet which depicts that endless life as being, for the vast majority of human beings, an agonising spiritual extension of the earthly prison, which will remove us even further from any awareness of the numinous.

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